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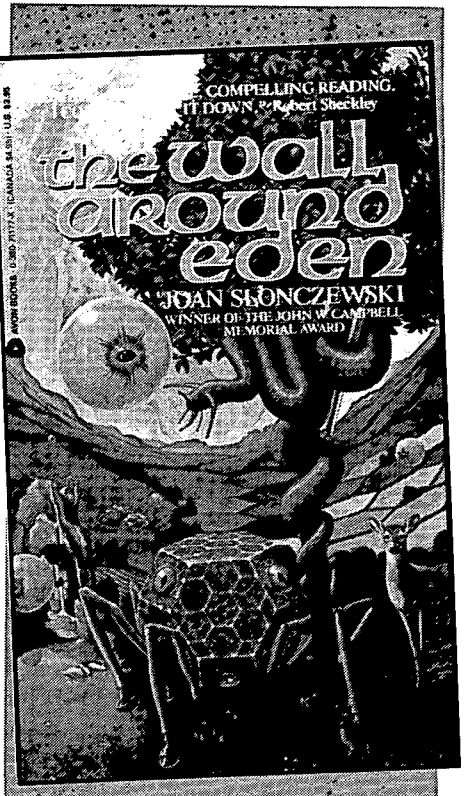

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EDITORIAL

SHORT CUTS

by Isaac Asimov

Someone asked recently if Gardner Dozois, our beloved Chestertonian editor, might not write an editorial for the magazine one of these days. Well, he won't because I keep the editorials as my own preserve and, barring extended ill health or death, I am not going to let anyone substitute for me.

Nevertheless, I was curious to see if Gardner, perhaps, might have hankerings in that direction, so I asked him if he would ever want to take over the editorial-writing job.

He shuddered. "No," he said, "I wouldn't know what to say, issue after issue after issue."

That was a great relief to me. I assured him he would never be saddled with the job while I lived, and I was delighted that I never had any trouble knowing what to say. This is my 164th editorial and there's no danger of my running out of prattle.

One trick is to read the letters we get. Many of them are inspirational, especially the ones that bullyrag and vituperate me. Show me a letter filled with a maddened hatred of everything I say and do and I'll show you one that is bound to contain some stupidity that is worth an editorial.

I received one the other day that found fault with *everything* about me, my looks, my thoughts, my writings, my deeds. His signature was a scrawl and he gave no address, so I'll refer to him as Mr. Scrawl.

He found fault with my habit of counting, for instance. I had said someplace that I hated having my mind in neutral, so that, sometimes, when I was badly bored, I was reduced to the expedient of counting the holes in the acoustical tiles in the ceiling.

This, he found to be a disgusting sign of my mental incapacity. Imagine counting the thousands of holes in the acoustical tiles, one, two, three, and so on. All you have to do, said Mr. Scrawl, is count the holes in one direction, then the holes in the direction at right angles and multiply the two.

It never occurred to the clever Mr. Scrawl that when I count the holes in the tiles, that little multiplication is exactly what I do. In fact, if the ceiling is covered by square tiles, I count the holes on one side (say "a"), of one of the tiles,

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then I count the number of tiles in one direction ("b") and the other ("c") and the total number of holes is equal to $a^2 \times b \times c$.

Mr. Scrawl, having painfully learned the multiplication table late in life, apparently can't believe that I learned it, too—when I was six years old.

There are many short cuts possible in calculating simple things, by the way, whether estimating the number of holes in a ceiling or adding up the cost of the items you have bought at the butcher shop or balancing your checkbook.

About a quarter century ago, a book came out which (as I recall) was called *The Trachtenberg Method* and which gave you all sorts of tricks for manipulating arithmetical calculations in your head.

Since I'm interested in such things, I tried reading the book but was quickly disillusioned. The mental tricks described were in some cases so complex and required so much in the way of remembering subtotals that it struck me as infinitely easier to use pen and paper.

But then it occurred to me that the Trachtenberg difficulties arose in only a minority of the arithmetical problems that you and I might encounter in our everyday dealings. Why not, therefore, write another book, giving simple little tricks for taking care of 90 percent of the arithmetical problems we might actually have to face?

So I did exactly that. I wrote a

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book called *Quick and Easy Math* and it was published by Houghton-Mifflin in 1964.

The tricks were really easy. I'm sure Mr. Scrawl can figure them out and would surely scold me for presenting anything that simple to the public.

For instance, suppose you want to add 29 and 17. It's easy to do that even in your head, if you carry figures. Thus, 9 and 7 are 16, put down 6 and carry 1, then 1 and 2 and 1 are 4 and the answer is 46. Fine. But suppose you consider 29 to be 30 − 1, and 17 to be 20 − 3.

If you add 30 − 1 and 20 − 3, you come out with 50 − 4, which is 46 instantly and you don't have to carry figures in your head.

It works for slightly more difficult additions, and for adding more than two numbers, too. I used to amuse myself when buying items at the butcher's in this way. After the order, containing five or six different things, was completed, the butcher would put down the five or six prices for each and I would call out the total virtually as soon as he had finished writing them. He would smile tolerantly, add them up painstakingly and, of course, it would come out as I said.

I stopped doing it, though, because the butcher would think I was a "mental marvel" and when I explained how it was done, he would think contemptuously that anyone could do it. Since I don't want to be either unfairly admired or unfairly condemned, I kept the total in my own head eventually and didn't announce it.

Here's another sample. Suppose you want to multiply 29 by 17. Almost anyone would quickly start scrawling on a piece of paper. Look at it this way, however. The product of 29 and 17 is the sum of 17 taken 29 times—17 + 17 + 17, and so on. But suppose you multiply 30 by 17, that's the sum of 17 taken 30 times; in other words there's one extra 17 in it. Well 3 × 17 is 51, so you can see at a glance that 30 × 17 is equal to 510. Well, that's one 17 too much and 510 − 17 is 493 and that's your answer.

Practice that sort of thing enough, and it becomes second nature and the need for pen and paper is reduced drastically.

As a matter of fact, we all make use of this kind of short cut. Memorizing the multiplication table is just a way of applying short cuts to addition. Here, for instance, is a true story.

I walked into the bank some years ago wanting to deposit some bond-clippings. I don't remember the exact figure, but suppose there were twenty of them at $190 each. Well 2 × 19 is 38, so 20 × 190, with the two 0's added is $3800, and that's the total I wrote down on the envelope.

The young teller couldn't very well take my word for it; it would be against bank policy. She therefore painstakingly counted the clips to make sure there were 20 of them and that each was $190. Having checked that, she needed the prod-

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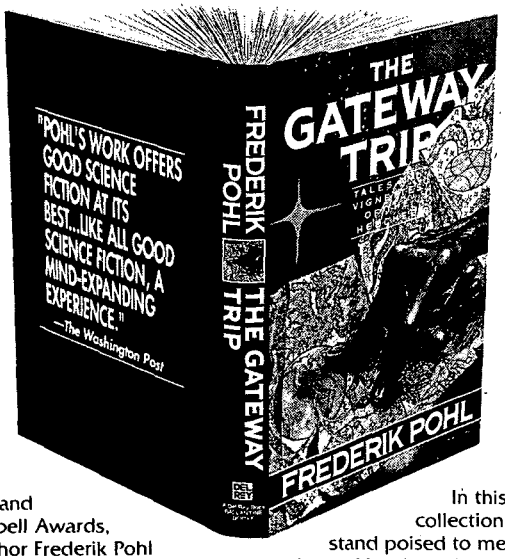
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uct of 20 and 190. Again she couldn't accept my total on faith and she apparently couldn't do it in her head, either, so she moved to the computer.

I waited tolerantly and then, to my absolute amazement, she did *not* (repeat, *not*) use the computer to multiply 20 by 190. Instead, she punched out 190, added 190, added 190, and kept that up twenty times, and finally came out with $3800. The poor teller, I could only assume, had never heard of multiplication and was forced to add.

On the other hand, someone once set up the following problem. Imagine two cars 60 miles apart, racing toward each other at a steady 30 mile an hour clip. Imagine a fly on the hood of one car flying to the other at a steady 60 miles an hour. Once it reached the other hood, it turned back instantly and flew to the first, again at 60 miles an hour. It did this repeatedly until the two cars crashed and killed the fly between them. The question is: How far did the fly fly?

One person figured and figured and couldn't solve the problem, so it was put to the mathematical genius, John von Neumann, who, in a few seconds, said, "The fly traveled 60 miles."

The one who posed the problem said, "There! If the cars were 60 miles apart and each was traveling at 30 miles an hour toward each other, they would crash in one hour, and if the fly were going at 60 miles an hour, it would travel 60 miles by the time of the crash regardless of how often it changed direction. What you did," he said to the person who had failed, "was to calculate the distance from one car to the next, allowing for motion, then the distance back to the first, and so on. You set up a converging series and tried to sum it."

At which, von Neumann said, "But that's what I did. I set up the converging series." No short cut, after all, but it took him only a few seconds.

Unfortunately, my book *Quick and Easy Math* was not a success. It ought to have been, but pocket calculators came out soon afterward and nobody needed short cuts anymore. You just use the calculator. What's more, in 1965, I published a book entitled *An Easy Introduction to the Slide Rule* and that went the way of the dinosaurs, too.

Even I now use the calculator. If I have to multiply 9 and 7, I check it on the calculator automatically.

Is that a good thing? I don't think so. It's convenient to take a car to the corner to buy a newspaper, but it would be better for your physical health to walk. In the same way, it would be better for your mental health to do a little thinking now and then instead of punching buttons like a zombie. But if I don't even listen to myself in this respect, how can I expect others to listen to me? ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I fell out of love with written science fiction about the same time that I fell out of love with the fantasy that I was destined to be a famous jazz saxophone player. But that doesn't mean that I sold my record collection. And I'm glad that my fourteen-year-old son subscribes to your magazine.

What I do enjoy reading these days is the kind of stuff to which I've been addicted since the early '70s: William S. Burroughs and the Argentinian author Julio Cortázar. I guess I enjoy their writing—and don't really consider it science fiction—because it strikes some chord in me left over from my days as one of those denizens of the altered states of the '60s. At least what I can remember.

And that is why it pleased me greatly to come across Kristine Kathryn Rusch's story *Trains* in the April '90 edition of *IAsfm*. Not that I would claim that her story contains any stylistic features that would tie it to William Burroughs or Julio Cortázar. It's just that the way it felt as I read it put me in the same state of mind as one who was watching the *axolotl*. I became absorbed. No wonder Ms. Rusch wins awards.

In the meantime, I'll keep the boy tied up good with a subscription, in hopes that more of Ms. Rusch's work—and others like hers—shows up on the pages of your magazine.

Nils R. B. Young
Medway, OH

PS: Your editorial *Posthumous* made me think of ol' L. Ron Hubbard, still churning out his stuff—and selling his mind drivel—from his great typewriter in the sky. All's clear what ends clear, I suppose.

I'll tell you this, with respect to your PS. When I pass on to the great typewriter in the sky, I will be bound to have a number of books and shorter pieces in press, but once those are printed, everything will be printed. I have nothing stashed away at the bottom of the barrel to be introduced in decades to come. Nothing. *Everything I write I have published as fast as the publishers can move (which sometimes isn't very fast, alas).*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

As with all your books, as soon as your latest novel, *Nemesis*, was on sale, I bought a copy, took it home, and read it straight through in one sitting. I loved it!

Since I enjoyed *Nemesis* so much,

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I eagerly read your editorial in the March 1990 issue which provided fascinating background information on your novel. It is a pity you could not be the first author to utilize the Nemesis Theory in fiction. That particular honor belongs to David Mace. His novel, *Nightrider*, also dealt with political dissidents who had colonized the planets of Sol's red dwarf companion and their conflicts with the home system. It was published in hardcover by Panther Books in 1985 and in paperback by Ace Books in 1987.

Still, of the two novels, *Nemesis* is the definitive treatment of this very unique theme. Congratulations. Keep up the good work.

Scott Jarrett
Lakeland, FL

It's a lucky thing that my various chores preclude me from reading much science fiction. Had I read Nightrider *(I didn't, you know) I would have hesitated to write* Nemesis. *Or to quote Thomas Gray: "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise."*

—Isaac Asimov

CONCERNING YOUR APRIL 1990 EDITORIAL

Dear Doctor Asimov,
I read with delight
whatever you write.
I read, too, the letters
written to their betters
by small-minded folk
who enjoy taking a poke
at whatever may strike
their particular dislike.
One of those gents
actually had the impudence
to suggest you relinquish your pen.
The rest of us, women
as well as men,
implore you don't do it—
the world would surely rue it.
O dear Doctor Asimov,
it's you we truly love.
You're the fudge on our sundae,
the reading that makes every day
a fun-day
If I continue to speak,
I could go on till next week.
Please don't desert us—
that would truly hurt us.

Doris R. Goldberg
Toledo, OH

Now this *is what I call great poetry. It moved me nearly to tears. I love you, too, Ms. Goldberg.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I just received my contributor's copy for the March issue. I am delighted with it—the presentation of my poem, "The Dragon in the Garden"; the quality of the other contributors; and the number of excellent strong, female characters. Times have changed since the days when good female characters were rare. I'm glad to see that *Asimov*'s is showing real women with real lives rather than male-identified pseudo-heroes with women's names. I'm particularly pleased with Janet Kagan's Mama Jason. (It's time senior citizens were allowed to have sex lives.) Rob Chilson's Gerda and Lisa Goldstein's Helena have messages for all of us. This trend can only increase sales. Keep up the great work.

Sincerely,

Sandra J. Lindow
Eau Claire, WI

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Why not? Women are *real women. When I was young in the 1930s the only function of women in pulp fiction was to be captured by the villain and to be rescued unharmed. She had virtually no speaking role; she only screamed. And when the hero and the villain fought, she never picked up a stick or a rock and tried to bean the villain. She just escalated the screaming. Golly, have we come a long way!*

—Isaac Asimov

To some people of limited means, the price of a magazine can be daunting. I well remember when I was young and always knew the exact amount of money I had and had to hold an internal war council every time the chance of spending a nickel came my way. We like to tell such readers that they will get value for their money. You mustn't be so easily insulted; it makes life unnecessarily unpleasant for you.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov:

Who really cares how many pages are in your magazine? It may seem trivial to you, but many of your readers find the tiny triangle insulting.

When you go to a book store to buy a particular work do you take a look at the last page to see how many pages it has? I, for one, never find myself saying to myself, "Hum, only 509 pages, probably not worth reading."

People who endeavor to glean a bit of insight out of what they read don't buy their intellectual food by the pound.

Please discontinue your practice of patronizing your subscribers. I have on the rare occasions that I read the letters section come across several complaints about the triangle, but I have never seen a letter defending it from your subscribers. I suggest that you allow your readers to vote on the issue so that you can get a general consensus.

Michael Gilbertson
Hutchinson, MN

PS: Thank you for your time. I thoroughly enjoy your publication.

Dear Editor:

I *do* enjoy reading science fiction—at least most of it—and, in *your* magazine . . . the stuff I *don't* like is when the author engages in Sashidemono (See Me) in telling the story. I remember reading a writer years ago who told us, "Get the hell out of the way, and tell the story." When the writer is showing off, it spoils the story for me. Science fiction writers seem to be prone to using uncommon words and convoluted phraseology. When I have to look up a word in the dictionary, it ruins the flow, and spoils the yarn for me. And I don't bother reading any more of *that* writer's output. It's really disappointing to buy a hardcover book, and find halfway through it the author has destroyed the mood by showing off and being cute. Other fields of fiction don't seem to be hampered by all this. Maybe I'm wrong; I'm only one reader.

I've read widely, not well, since before I went to school—someone bothered to teach me how, when I was a patient in a T.B. sanitorium. So, I'm no genius. I do have my favorite authors, and for the above

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reasons most of them are *not* in science fiction. I've put in sixty years of reading, from pulps to science, and almost everything in-between —so, I've seen enough material to make my point. Another pain in the bum-bum is telling the story, or part of it, in the present tense. Enough complaining. Keep up the good work.

Bob Harker
Owensboro, KY

I agree with you that having a writer show off is sickening. However, *the use of an unfamiliar word is not necessarily a show-off matter. Sometimes the word is a scientific one for which there is no substitute. Sometimes the word is ordinary English but exactly fits and a simpler synonym simply won't do. Look at it this way, please. Reading is a way of increasing one's vocabulary, which is* very *important. Each time you look up a word in the dictionary, your education is being broadened. Don't disdain that.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I know that your editorial "Predictions" is history and that you have gone on to newer things, but I recently encountered two items which brought the editorial back to mind and which I thought you might find entertaining.

Item one: I recently took note of some passages that appeared in John D. MacDonald's *Ballroom of the Skies*, copyright 1952. If you have not read the book, it takes place in a United States that has become a second rate power due to a global war in the '70s. Imagine suggesting that by the mid '50s children would become obsessed with television. And that with weakened skills for self-entertainment people would take to the streets, resorting to drugs and violence. Really! And gangs of child thugs? Such imagination!

Seriously, in a moment of boredom I chose the book at random from my collection to reread after (mumble) years. The passages cited were only two of many that struck resonances. In his afterword, dated 1968, Mr. MacDonald expresses his pleased surprise at how well the book had held up over the years and says that he did not revise anything. I can testify that twenty-two years later, the book may actually have improved with age. It is still a very good read.

Item two: I just completed a course in computer networking. The basic problem in communicating between computers is how to insure that data is received correctly in spite of possible noise on the line. A naïve approach (actually used) is for one computer to send a packet and then wait for the other computer to acknowledge receipt. The problem with this is that computers are so fast, compared with the transmission times, that they end up sitting idle most of the time waiting for data or acknowledgments. A better method is for each computer to send out a continuous stream of packets simultaneously, imbedding acknowledgments (or notices that a packet was garbled) in with the data.

Dr. Asimov, if memory serves me correctly, wasn't it you who wrote a short story titled, "My Son the Astronaut"? In the story, a group

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on Earth was trying to figure out how to help the crew of a space probe to the outer planets solve an emergency which had arisen. The problem was that the vast distances resulted in transmission times which made normal conversation all but impossible. The mother of one of the crew members said something like, "Why don't you do like we ladies do when we talk on the phone? Each of us just keeps talking about whatever comes to mind, and if we hear the other one say something that is interesting or requires a response, we just slip it into the conversation somewhere." Maybe there should be a way for you to patent each of your stories.

Tim Preston
Albuquerque, NM

I am always surprised when people dig up something in one or another of my stories that proves prophetic in any way. I never seem to see it unless someone points it out (except in the obvious case of my robots). The name of the story, by the way, is "My Son, the Physicist."
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I'm sure all your faithful readers know that those who dislike science fiction seem compelled to ask those of us who do "Why?"

My usual retort is "Because like Everest, it's **there**." But that hardly does justice to my real reasons—I say it merely to terminate what I know will be a time-wasting conversation.

The last time I was asked this—a friend saw a year's worth of *IAsfm*'s on my coffee table—I felt compelled to supply a rational answer.

I believe I like science fiction because I detect in most of the best stories a future world where women are truly equal to men in every way. This affords a terrific opportunity to fantasize! Now I am perfectly aware that not all stories stress, or even touch on this theme. But I wager that only in science fiction are there a plethora of those that do. And when they do, women are pictured as capable, intelligent, honest, and admired—or, inept, stupid, devious and detested in the case of *woman as villain*—but always **equal** with the leading male characters. As I write, I am thinking of Dr. Susan Calvin.

Science fiction as escape literature need make no apologies. Here it is, 1990, and my gender isn't even mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. Yet I can read of women piloting faster-than-light craft, and adroitly confounding conspiratorial plots, and loving men who treat them with respect and a notable absence of macho exploitativeness.

Sure, it's all "fiction." A dream world. And that's why I like it most of all. Perhaps it isn't too much to dream as well that the young who devour science fiction stories will be influenced by these themes, and will someday make it all come true.

Bette Chambers
Lacey, WA

Dear Bette, (I know her and she's a wonderful woman) science fiction readers are more civilized than most, in my opinion, and it is impossible to be civilized and to be a racist or

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sexist. Stick with us and yell at us if we slip.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Let me start by saying that I have been a fan of yours for the past fifteen years. Your stories have allowed me to travel to distant worlds and meet many interesting people. Because of the interest in the unknown, space travel, distant worlds, etc. you sparked in me as a teenager, I am pursuing a degree in Biomedical Engineering.

Before I get to the main reason I am writing you, I must respond to your March 1990 editorial. Thanks for not listening to the person who suggested that you stop writing! To suggest that your stories contain explicit sexual encounters is pure rubbish. Your characters are written in such a life-like form that it would be unrealistic to exclude any part of a normal adult's life. Your characters eat, breathe, love, and even die, if the story line deems it so. That's what makes it such wonderful reading. Your attention to detail allows me to become a part of the story. It's as if I were there with your characters and were having the same experiences. I've traveled to many places, in your books. Besides, even if you decide not to write another story, I'm sure your fans will just reread your old books. So you might as well continue contributing to the literary world.

About ten years ago, my wife gave me a copy of the Foundation trilogy for my birthday. She didn't realize just what she had done, till it was too late. I started reading the trilogy on a Friday night and finished the book on Sunday evening. Needless to say, I didn't do much else that weekend except read. Since she couldn't stop me from reading SF, she's joined me. By the way, the subscription to this magazine is in her name. Anyway back to my point: if your readers are willing to endure an occasional irate spouse, it's your responsibility to continue writing.

The stories in *IAsfm* are all top notch. But there is one writer that I find most enjoyable. Janet Kagan's adventures on the frontier planet Mirabile are excellent! Has she written any full length novels about this planet? If not, please pass on my encouragement to do so. Even a collection of her short stories about life on Mirabile would be a welcome addition to my library. The three stories that she has written so far, cause me to scan the cover of each new *IAsfm* for her name, in hope of a new adventure for Mama Jason.

I've taken enough of your time. Thank you for your stories and most of all, thank you for introducing me to the world of science and technology.

Sincerely,

Patrick Hoppe
West Allis, WI

A gratifying number of people have written to urge me to continue writing. Have no fear! I need no urging. When I stop breathing, I will stop writing, and not before. If anyone is interested the number of my books as of now is 451. Who knows? I may make 500.

—Isaac Asimov

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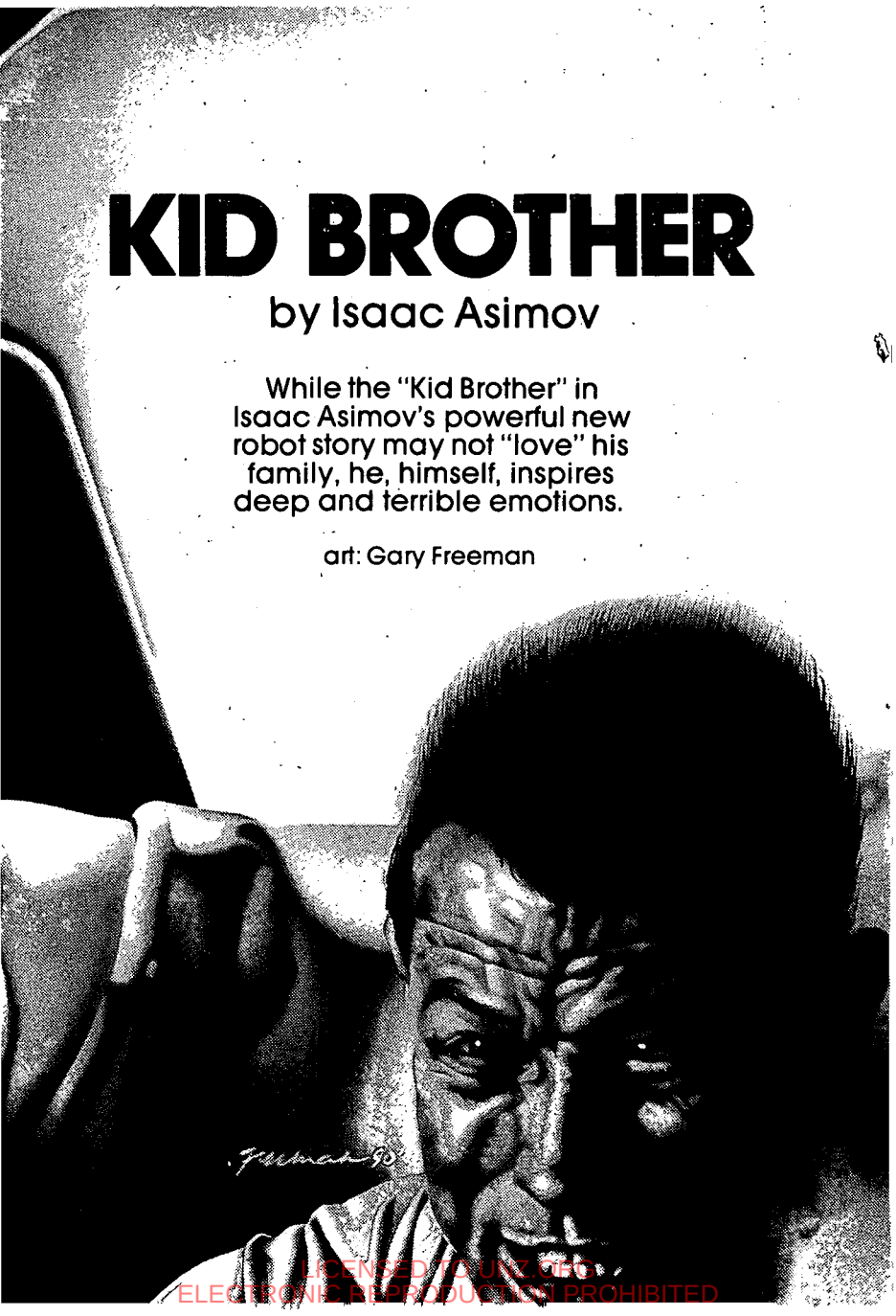
KID BROTHER

by Isaac Asimov

While the "Kid Brother" in Isaac Asimov's powerful new robot story may not "love" his family, he, himself, inspires deep and terrible emotions.

art: Gary Freeman



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It was a great shock to me when our application for a second child was refused. We had really expected to get the license.

I'm a respectable citizen; pillar of the community; all that kind of stuff. I was a little old, maybe. Josie—my wife—may have been past her best childbearing years. So what? We know other people worse off than us, older, trashy in character, who— Well, never mind.

We had one son, Charlie, and we really wanted another child. Boy or girl, it didn't matter. Of course, if there was something wrong with Charlie, if he developed some illness, maybe then we could license a second child. Or maybe not. And if we did get the license, they would probably take care of Charlie as a defective. You know what I mean; I don't have to say it.

The trouble was we were late getting started, and that was Josie's fault. She had irregular periods and you never knew when to get her, if you know what I mean. And we couldn't get any medical help, either. How could we? The clinics said if we couldn't have children without help, that was great for the world. It's patriotic, or something, to be childless.

But we fooled them and had a child after all. Charlie.

When Charlie was eight months old, we started applying for a second child. We wanted them pretty close in age. Was that so much to ask? Even if we were getting a little old for it? What kind of a world do we live in, anyway. No matter how much the population drops, they say it has to drop farther, and if life gets easier and people live longer, it has to drop still farther.

They won't be satisfied till they wipe out humanity alto—

Well, look! I'll tell this just the way I want to. If you want the story, officer, you'll have to take it my way. What can you do to me? I really don't much care if I live or die. Would you in my position? —Look, it's no use arguing. I'll tell it my way, or I'll shut up and you can do your worst. You understand? —Well then, okay.

As it turned out, we didn't have to worry about Charlie being sickly, or anything like that. He grew like a bear, or one of those other animals that used to hang around in the woods and places like that in the old days. He came of good stock. You could see that. So why couldn't we have had another child? That's what I want to know.

Intelligent? You bet. Strong. Knew what he wanted. Ideal boy. When I think of it, I could—I could— Oh, well.

You should have seen him with the other kids as he was growing up. A natural leader. Always had his way. Always had the other children in the neighborhood doing what he wanted. He knew what he wanted and what he wanted was always right. That was the thing.

Josie didn't like it, though. She said he was spoiled. In fact, she said

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I spoiled him. I don't know what she was talking about. I was the making of him.

He was two years ahead of his age in strength and in brains. I could see that. And if the other children got out of line, sometimes he would have to show them who was boss.

Josie thought he was getting to be a bully. She said he had no friends; all the children were afraid of him.

So what! A leader doesn't want friends. He wants people to respect him, and if they get out of line, they better *fear* him. Charlie was coming along all right. Sure, the other children stayed away mostly. That was their parents' fault; and they're just a bunch of milksops. Once they get one child, and know they won't have any more, they start hovering over him or her like they were the family jewels, and rare jewels, too. You smother them if you do that. They become useless—worthless.

There was this guy Stevenson down the block. He had two girls, both pitiful things, giggling and empty-headed. How did he come to get two, I ask you? He knew somebody, maybe. A little money passed from hand to hand. Why not, he's got more money than he admits, too. Naturally. That accounts for it. You'd think with two, he could afford to risk one, but no—

—That's all right. I'll get to the point, when I get to the point. If you push, you'll get nothing and we'll let it go straight to the court. See if I care.

These other parents, they didn't want their babies hurt. Don't play with the Janowitz boy, they would say. I never heard them say so but I'm sure that's what they said. Well, who needed them? I was planning for Charlie to go to college eventually, so he could take courses in microelectronics or in spatial dynamics, or that kind of stuff. And economics and business, too, so he would know how to get money and power out of his know-how. That's the way I saw it. I wanted him on top of the heap.

But Josie kept talking about Charlie not having friends and Charlie growing up alone, and like that. All the time. It was like living in an echo chamber. And then, one day, she came to me and said, "Why don't we get Charlie a kid brother?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "You're past menopause so what do we do? Call in the stork? Look under cabbage leaves?"

I could have divorced her, you know. Married a young chick. After all, *I* wasn't past menopause. But I was—loyal. Fat lot of good that did me. Besides, if I had divorced her, she would mostly have kept Charlie, so what good would *that* have done me?

So I just made that comment about the stork.

She said, "I'm not talking about a biological child. I'm saying we can get a robot to be Charlie's brother."

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I never expected to hear anything like that, you can bet. I'm not a robot-type guy. My parents never had one. I never had one. As far as I'm concerned, every robot means one less human, and we're just watching the world being turned over to them. Just one more way of wiping out humanity, if you ask me.

So I said to Josie, "Don't be ridiculous."

"Really," said Josie, all very earnest. "It's a new model. It's just designed to be friendly and pals for children. Nothing fancy, so they aren't expensive, and they do fill a need. With more and more people having only one child, there is a real value in supplying that one child with siblings."

"That may be true of other children. Not Charlie," I said.

"Yes, Charlie, especially. He's never going to find out how to deal with people this way. He's growing up alone, really alone. He won't come to understand the give and take of life."

"He's not going to give. He's a taker. He'll take power and he'll take position, and he'll tell people what to do. And he'll have children of his own and maybe even three."

You may be too young to feel this yet, officer, but if you have only one child, you'll eventually discover you'll still have a chance at another one when your child has a child. I had high hopes for Charlie. Before I died, I was sure I would see another child, maybe even two or three. They might be Charlie's but as far as our lives would overlap, I was going to make them mine, too.

But all Josie could think about was a robot. Life became another kind of echo chamber. She priced them out. She figured out the down-payment. She looked into the possibility of renting one for a year on a kind of approval. She was willing to use her own nest egg that her folks had left her to pay for it, and things like that. And you know how it is, in the end you have to keep peace in the family.

I gave in. I said, "Okay, but you go pick one out and you better make it a rental. —And you pay for it."

I figured, who knows. The robot would probably be a pain in the neck and wouldn't work out, and we'd return him.

They walked him into the house, didn't even crate him. I should say "it" but Josie insisted on saying "he" and "him" so he would seem more like a kid brother to Charlie, and I got into the habit.

He was a "sibling-robot"; that's what they called him. He had a registration number, but I never memorized it. What for? We just called him "Kid." That was good enough. —Yes, I know that this sort of robot is getting popular. I don't know what's happening to human beings that they stand for such things.

And we stood for it, too. Or at least, I did. Josie was fascinated. The

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one we got was a pretty good one, I have to admit. He looked almost human, he smiled a lot, and he had a nice voice. He looked maybe fifteen, a small-sized fifteen, which wasn't too bad because Charlie was a large-sized ten.

Kid was a little taller than Charlie and, of course, heavier. You know, there were titanium bones or whatever inside him and a nuclear unit, guaranteed for ten years before replacement, and that's pretty heavy.

He had a good vocabulary, too, and he was very polite. Josie was just delighted. She said, "I can use him in the house. He can help out."

I said, "No, you don't. You got him for Charlie, and that means he's Charlie's. Don't you go taking him away."

I was thinking if Josie got him, and made him into a slavey, she'd never let go of him. Charlie, on the other hand, might not like him or might get tired after a little while, and then we could get rid of him.

Charlie fooled me, though. He liked Kid fine.

But you know, it made sense after a while. Kid was *designed* to be a kid brother, so he was just right for Charlie. He let Charlie take the lead, like an older brother should. He had those three Laws. I can't quote them, but you know what they are. There was no way he could hurt Charlie, and he had to do whatever Charlie said, so after a while I began to think it was a good deal.

I mean when they played games Charlie always won. He was supposed to. And the Kid never got mad. He couldn't. He was made to lose. And sometimes Charlie kicked the Kid around, the way children do, you know. A child gets mad about something, he takes it out on some other child. Children always do that. Naturally, that gets the parents of the other child mad and I had to tell Charlie now and then not to do that and that sort of cramps him. It squeezes him in. He can't express himself.

Well, he could with the Kid. And why not? You can't hurt the Kid. He's made out of plastic and metal and who knows what else. For all he looked nearly like a human being, he wasn't alive; he couldn't feel pain.

In fact, I felt the best thing the Kid did was to be something on which Charlie could bleed off his excess energy so that it wouldn't accumulate in him and fester. And the Kid never minded. They'd play judo and the Kid would be thrown, and even stamped on, but he would just get up and say, "That was good, Charlie. Let's try it again." Listen, you could throw him off the top of a building and he wouldn't be hurt.

He was always polite to us. He called me Dad. He called Josie Mom. He asked after our health. He would help Josie out of her chair when she wanted to stand up. That sort of stuff.

He was designed that way. He had to act affectionate. It was all automatic. He was programmed for it. It didn't mean a thing, but Josie liked it. Listen, I've always been busy, hard-working. I have this plant

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I had to help run, interlocking machinery to oversee. One thing goes wrong and the whole shebang ties itself up. I have no time to bring flowers and go mucking around pulling out her chairs or something. We'd been married nearly twenty years and how long does that sort of thing keep up anyway?

And Charlie— Well, he stood up to his mother the way any decent boy should. And I figured the Kid helped there. When Charlie made himself boss over the Kid one minute, he wasn't going to run around saying, "Mommie, Mommie," the next minute. He was *not* a Mamma's boy, and he didn't let Josie run him, and I was proud of him for that. He was going to be a man. Of course, he listened to what *I* said to him. A boy's got to listen to his father.

So maybe it was good that the Kid was designed to be a sort of Mamma's boy. It gave Josie the feeling that there was one of those nerds about the house and it bothered her less that Charlie always thought for himself.

Of course you could count on Josie to do her best to spoil it. She was forever worrying about her pet nerd being hurt. She was always coming out with, "Now, Charlie, why don't you be nicer to your kid brother?"

It was ridiculous. I could never get it through her head that the Kid wasn't hurt; that he was designed to be a loser; that it was all good for Charlie.

Of course, Charlie never listened to her. He played with the Kid the way *he* wanted to.

—Do you mind if I rest a little. I don't really like talking about all this. Just let me rest a while.

—Okay, I'm better now. I can go on.

After the year was up, I felt that it was enough. We could return the Kid to U.S. Robots. After all, he had served his purpose.

But Josie was against that. Dead set against that.

I said, "But we'd have to buy him outright now."

And she said, she would pay the down payment, so I went along with her.

One of the things she said was that we couldn't take away Charlie's brother. Charlie would be lonely.

And I did think, well, maybe she's right. I tell you it's deadly when you start thinking your wife might be right. It leads you into nothing but trouble.

Charlie did ease up on the Kid a little as he grew older. He got to be just as tall as the Kid, for one thing, so maybe he didn't think he had to knock him around as much.

Also, he became interested in things besides rough and tumble. Basketball, for instance, he played one-on-one with the Kid and Charlie was *good*. He always outmaneuvered the Kid and hardly ever missed a basket.

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Well, maybe the Kid let himself be outmaneuvered and maybe he didn't ever block a basket-shot efficiently, but how do you account for getting the ball into the basket? The Kid couldn't fake that, could he?

In the second year, the Kid sort of became a member of the family. He didn't eat with us or anything like that, because he didn't eat. And he didn't sleep either, so he just stood in the corner of Charlie's bedroom at night.

But he watched the holoviews with us, and Josie would always explain things to him so that he got to know more and to seem more human. She took him shopping with her and wherever else she went, if Charlie didn't need him. The Kid was always helpful, I suppose, and I guess he carried things for her and was always polite and attentive and that sort of thing.

And I'll tell you. Josie was more easy-going, with the Kid around. More good-humored, more good-natured, less whining. It made for a more pleasant homelife, and I figured, well, the Kid is teaching Charlie to be more and more dominant, and he's teaching Josie to smile more, so maybe it was a good thing it was there.

Then it happened. —Listen, can you let me have something wet? —Yeah, with alcohol. Just a little, just a little. Come on, what are you worrying about the rules for? I've got to get through this somehow.

—Then it happened. One out of a million—or out of a billion. Microfusion units aren't supposed to give trouble. You can read about it anywhere. They're all fail-safe, no matter what. Except mine wasn't. I don't know why. Nobody knows why. At the start, no one even knew it was the microfusion. They've told me since that it was, and that I qualify for full restoration of the house and furniture.

Fat lot of good that would do me. Look, you're treating me as though I were a homicidal maniac, but why me? Why aren't you getting after the microfusion people for murder? Find out who made that unit, or who goofed up installing it.

Don't you people know what *real* crimes are? There's this thing, this microfusion—it doesn't explode, it doesn't make a noise, it just gets hotter and hotter and after a while the house is on fire. How come people can get away manufacturing—

Yes, I'll get on with it. I'll get on with it.

I was away that day. That one day in a whole year I was away. I run everything from my home, or from wherever I am with my family. I don't have to *go* anywhere, the computers do it all. It's not like *your* job, officer.

But the big boss wanted to see me in person. There's no sense to it; everything could have been done closed-circuit. He has some sort of idea, though, that he wants to check all his section heads every once in a while in person. He seems to think that you can't really judge a person unless you see him in three dimensions and smell him and feel him. It's just

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superstition left over from the Dark Age—which I wish would come back, before computers and robots, and when you could have all the children you wanted.

That was the day when the microfusion went.

I got the word right away. You always get the word. Wherever you are, even on the Moon or in a space settlement, bad news gets to you in seconds. Good news you might miss out on, but bad news never.

I was rushing back while the house was still burning.

When I got there, the house was a total wreck, but Josie was out on the lawn, looking a complete mess, but alive. She had been out on the lawn when it happened, they told me.

When she saw the house become all in flame, and Charlie was inside, she rushed in at once, and I could see she must have brought him out because there he was lying to one side with people bending over him. It looked bad. I couldn't see him. I didn't dare go over there to see him. I had to find out from Josie first.

I could hardly speak. "How bad is he?" I asked Josie, and I didn't recognize my own voice. I think my mind was beginning to go.

She was saying, "I couldn't save them both. I couldn't save them both."

Why should she want to save them both? I thought. I said, "Stop worrying about the Kid. He's just a *device*. There's insurance and compassion money and we can buy another Kid." I think I tried to say all that, but I don't know if I managed. Maybe I just made hoarse, choking sounds. I don't know.

I don't know if she heard me, or if she even knew I was there. She just kept whispering, "I had to make a choice," over and over.

So I *had* to go where Charlie was lying and I cleared my throat and I managed to say. "How's my boy? How badly is he hurt?"

And one of them said, "Maybe he can be fixed up," then he looked up at me and said, "Your *boy*?"

I saw the Kid lying there, with one arm distorted and out of action. He was smiling as if nothing had happened, and he was saying, "Hello, Dad. Mom pulled me out of the fire. Where's Charlie?"

Josie had made her choice and she had saved the Kid.

I don't know what happened after that. I remember nothing. You people say I killed her; that you couldn't pull me off before I strangled her.

Maybe. I don't know. I don't remember. All I know is—*she's* the killer.

She killed—she killed—Char—

She killed my boy and she saved a piece—

A piece of—

Titanium. ●

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Well buckle my swash and shift my shape, it's great to get away from it all and enter a fantasy world. Just look at some of the advantages. Where else can thieves become kings or one can apprentice one's self to a sorcerer? (*The New York Yellow Pages* has five entries for Merlin but none are currently in the market for a learn-as-you-go assistant.) Where else can a nerd become a hero or a hacker a warrior? With the help of Williams or Simmons anything is possible.

When you see me around ask me for a mystery—I may recommend a whodunit with a narrator who happens to be both a computer and a killer.

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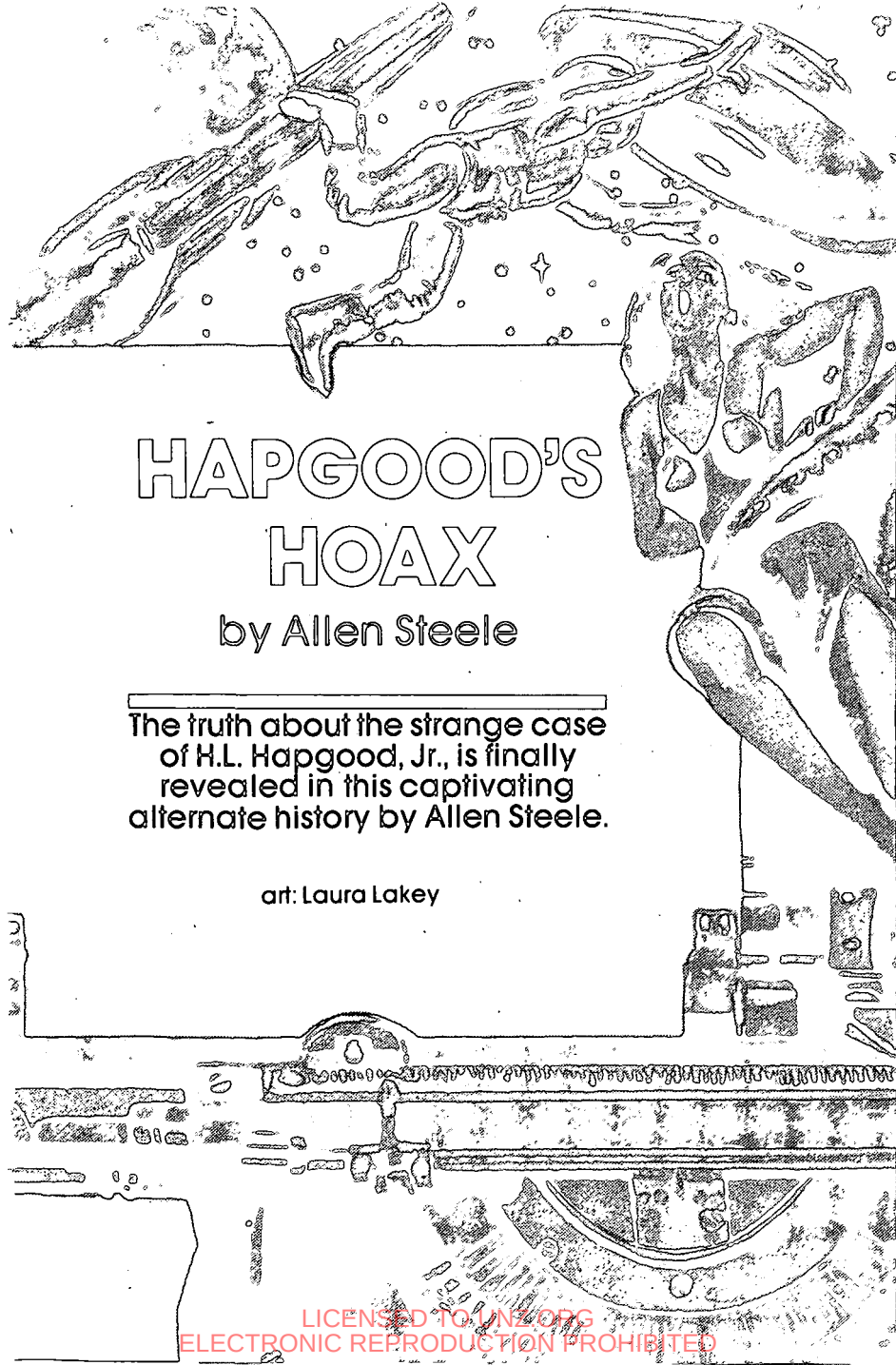

HAPGOOD'S HOAX

by Allen Steele

The truth about the strange case of H.L. Hapgood, Jr., is finally revealed in this captivating alternate history by Allen Steele.

art: Laura Lakey

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HAPGOOD, H. L. (Harold LaPierre), *—1911-1966; American pulp SF writer of the 1930s and 1940s. Although most of his short fiction is obscure today, Hapgood is best known (as Dr. H. LaPierre Hapgood) as the author of several allegedly non-fictional works on UFO contact, including* Abducted to Space *(1950) and* UFO! *(1952). These works were based on Hapgood's claim that he was seized by aliens from space in 1948, which is widely regarded as a hoax.*

—The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy
Ursula May, editor (1981)

Lawrence R. Bolger; Professor of English, Minnesota State University, and science fiction historian.

Harry Hapgood. (*Sighs.*) It would figure that someone would want to interview me about Harry Hapgood, especially since the new collection of his work just came out. The field may not be able to get rid of him until someone digs up his coffin and hammers a stake in his heart. . . .

Okay, since you've come all this way, I'll tell you about H.L. Hapgood, Jr. But, to tell the truth, I'd just as soon leave the bastard in his literary grave.

There were pulp writers from the '30s who managed to survive the times and outlast the pulps, to make the transition from pulp fiction to whatever passes as literature in this genre. Jack Williamson, Clifford Simak, Ray Bradbury . . . those are some of the ones whose work eventually broke out of the pulp mold. They're regarded as the great writers of the field and we still read their stories. They still find their audience. Their publishers keep their classics, like *City* and *The Humanoids* and *The Martian Chronicles,* in print.

Those are the success stories. Yet for every Bradbury or Williamson, there're a hundred other writers—some of them big names back then, you need to remember—who didn't make it out of the pulp era. For one reason or another, their careers faded when the pulps died at the end of the '40s. H. Bedford-Jones, Arthur K. Barnes, S.P. Meek . . . all obscure authors now. Just like H.L. Hapgood, Jr.

Not that they were necessarily bad writers, either. I mean, some of their stories are no more crap than a lot of the stuff that gets into print today. But when the field started to grow up, when John Campbell began to demand that his *Astounding* contributors deliver realistic SF or else . . . well, Harry was one of those writers who fell into the "or else" category.

But before that, he had been extraordinarily successful, especially when you consider the times. The Depression nearly killed a lot of writers, but those years were kind to him. He had a nonstop imagination and fast fingers, and, for a penny a word, Harry Hapgood cranked out stories

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by the bushel. I was reading all the SF pulps at the time—I was in high school in Ohio then—so I can tell you with personal authority that there was rarely a month that went by without H.L. Hapgood's byline appearing somewhere. If not in *Amazing* or *Thrilling Wonder*, then in the pre-Campbell era *Astounding* or *Captain Future* or someplace else. "The Sky Pirates of Centaurus," "Attack of the Giant Robots," "Mars or Bust!"—those were some of his more memorable stories. Rock-jawed space captains fighting Venusian tiger-men while mad scientists with Z-ray machines menaced ladies in bondage. Greasy kid stuff, sure, but a hell of a lot of fun when you were fourteen years old. Harry was the master of the space opera. Not even Ed Hamilton or Doc Smith could tell 'em like he could.

You can still find some of his older work in huckster rooms at SF conventions, if you look through the raggy old pulps some people have on the tables. That's about the only place you can find Harry Hapgood's pulp stories anymore. I think his last published story, at least in his lifetime, was in *Amazing* in '45 or '46. The last time any of his early work was reprinted was when somebody put together a pulp anthology about ten years ago. When he died in '66, his career in science fiction had been long since over.

That's the main reason why he's been obscure all these years. But there was also the New Hampshire hoax. He died a rich man because of that stunt, but he also blackened his name in the field. I don't think anyone wanted to remember Hapgood because of that. At least, not until recently . . .

Startled and dazzled by the sudden burst of light, I looked up and saw a monstrous disk-shaped vehicle descending toward me. Rocket-fighters raced from the sky to combat the weird machine, but as they got close, scarlet rays flashed from portals along the side of the spaceship. The rockets exploded!

"Dirk, oh Dirk!" Catherine screamed from the bunker next to me, fearful of the apparition. "What can it be?"

Before I could answer, Captain Black of the United Earth Space Force spoke up. "The Quongg death machine, Miss Jones," he said, his chin thrust out belligerently.

I reached for my blaster. "Oh, yeah?" I snarled. "Well, they'll never take us alive!"

Captain Black stared at me. "They'll take us alive, all right!" he snarled. "They want us as specimens!"

—"Kidnappers From The Stars",
by H.L. Hapgood Jr.
Space Tales; December, 1938

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Joe Mackey; retired electrical engineer.

If I remember correctly, I first met Harry Hapgood back in 1934 or 1935, when we both lived in the same three-decker in Somerville, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. I was about nineteen at the time and was working a day-job in a deli on Newbury Street to put myself through M.I.T. night school. So, y'know, when I wasn't making grinders or riding the trolley over to classes in Cambridge, I was at home hitting the books. I got maybe four hours of sleep in those days. The Depression was a bitch like that.

I met Harry because he lived right upstairs. His apartment was directly above mine and he used to bang on his typewriter late at night, usually when I was studying or trying to sleep. Every time he hit the carriage return, it sounded like something was being dropped on the floor. I had no idea what he was doing up there . . . practicing somersaults or something.

Anyway, one night I finally got fed up with the racket, so I marched upstairs and hammered on his door, planning on telling him to cut it out 'cause I was trying to catch a few winks. Well, he opened his door—very timidly—and I started to chew him out. Then I looked past him and saw all these science fiction magazines scattered all over the place. Piled on the coffee table, the couch, the kitchen table, the bed . . . *Amazing, Astonishing, Thrilling Wonder, Planet Stories, Startling Stories.* Heaps of them. My jaw just dropped open because, though I read all those magazines when I could afford to buy 'em, I thought I was the only person in Boston who read science fiction.

So I said something like, "Holy smoke! You've got the new issue of *Astounding!*" I remember that it was lying open on the coffee table. Brand new issue. I was too broke to pick it up myself.

Harry just smiled, then he walked over and picked it up and brought it to me. "Here, you can borrow it if you want," he said. Then he added, very slyly, "Read the story by H.L. Hapgood. You might like it."

I nodded and said, "Yeah, I really like his stories." He just blushed and coughed into his fist and shuffled his feet and then he told me who he was.

Well, I didn't say anything about his typing after that, but once he found out I was taking night classes at M.I.T., he stopped typing late at night so I could get some sleep. He figured it out for himself. Harry was a good guy like that.

Margo Croft; literary agent; former assistant editor, *Rocket Adventures.*

I was the first-reader at *Rocket* back then, so I read Harry's stories when they came in through the mail, which was once every week or two.

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Seriously. In his prime, he was more prolific than Bob Silverberg or Isaac Asimov ever were. But the difference was, Silverberg and Asimov were good writers, even in their pulp days.

No, no, scratch that. At a certain level, Harry *was* good. He knew how to keep a story going. He was a master of pacing, for one thing. But it was all formula fiction, even if he didn't recognize the formula himself. Anyone who compares him to E.E. Smith or Edmond Hamilton is fooling you. His characters were one-dimensional, his dialogue was vintage movie serial. "Ah-ha, Dr. Zoko, I've got you now!"—that sort of thing. His understanding of real science was nonexistent. In fact, he usually ignored science. When it was convenient, say, for a pocket of air to exist in a crater on the Moon, there it was.

But his stories were no worse than the other stuff we published, and he got his share of fan mail, so we sent him lots of checks. For a long time, he was in our stable of regular writers. Whenever we needed a six thousand-word story to fill a gap in the next issue, there was always an H.L. Hapgood yarn in the inventory. He was a fiction factory.

I finally met him at the first World Science Fiction Convention, in New York back in '39. I think it was Donald Wollheim who introduced us. I was twenty years old then, flat-chested and single, ready to throw myself at the first writer who came along, so I developed a crush on Harry at once. He might have been a hack, but he was a good-looking hack *(Laughs)*.

He had fans all around him, though, because he was such a well-known writer. I spent the better part of Saturday following him around Caravan Hall, trying to get his attention. It was hard. Harry was shy when it came to one-on-one conversation, but he soaked up the glory when a mob was around.

Anyway, I finally managed to get him into a group that was going out to dinner that night. We found an Italian restaurant a few blocks away and took over a long table in the back room. There were a whole bunch of us—I think Ray Bradbury was in the group, though nobody knew who he was then—and I managed to get myself positioned across the table from Harry. Like I said, he was very shy when it came to one-on-one conversation, so I gave up on talking to him like a pretty girl and tried speaking to him like an editor. He began to notice me then.

His lack of—well, for lack of better term, literary sophistication—was mind-boggling. He had barely heard of Ernest Hemingway, and he only recognized Steinbeck as the name of his neighborhood grocer. The only classics he had read were by H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. In fact, the only thing Harry seemed to have ever read was science fiction or *Popular Mechanics*, and that was all he wanted to talk about. I mean, there I was trying to show off my legs—maybe I had no chest back then, but my

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legs were Marlene Dietrich's—and Harry only wanted to discuss the collected work of Neil R. Jones.

So I lost a little interest in him during that talk, and after a while I started paying attention to other people at the table. I *do* distinctly remember two things Harry said that night. One was that his ambition was to get rich and famous. He was convinced that he would write for the pulps forever. "Science fiction will never change," he proclaimed.

The other was a comment which sounds routine today. Every other SF writer has said it at least once, but I recall Harry saying it first, at least as far as I can remember. It probably sticks in my mind because of what happened years later.

"If aliens ever came to Earth to capture people," he said offhandedly at one point, "they wouldn't have to hunt for me. I'd volunteer for the trip."

Joe Mackey:

Harry Hapgood was a hell of a good person back then. You can quote me on that. He put me up to a lot of meals when I was starving, and he always had a buck to spare even when his own rent was due. But the day I saw him begin to hurt was the day John Campbell rejected one of his stories.

I had dropped by his place after work. It was in the middle of winter . . . 1940, I think . . . and the M.I.T. semester hadn't yet started, so I had some time to kill. The mail had just come, and when I came into Harry's apartment he was sitting at his kitchen table, bent over a manuscript which had just come back in the mail. It was a rejection from *Astounding*.

This almost never happened to him. Harry thought he was rejection-proof. After all, his stories usually sold on the first shot. That, and the fact that *Astounding* had always been one of his most reliable markets. But Harry's old editor, F. Orlin Tremaine, had left a couple of years earlier, and the new guy, John W. Campbell, was reshaping the magazine . . . and that meant getting rid of the zap-gun school of science fiction.

So here was Harry, looking at this story which had been bounced back, "Enslaved On Venus." Just staring at it, that's all. "What's going on?" I asked, and he told me that Campbell had just rejected this story. "Did he tell you why?" I said. Harry told me he had received a letter, but he wouldn't show it to me. I think it was in the trash. "Well, just send it out again to some other magazine," I said, because this is what he had always told me should be done when a story gets rejected.

But he just shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't think so."

Something John Campbell had written in that letter had really gotten

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to Harry. Whatever Campbell had written in that letter, it had cut right to the bone. I don't think Campbell ever consciously tried to hurt writers whose work he rejected, but he was known to be tough . . . and now he had gotten tough on Harry.

Anyway, Harry told me that he wanted to be alone for a while, so I left his place. I wasn't really worried. I had confidence that "Enslaved On Venus" would be published somewhere else. But I never saw that story make it into print, and Harry never mentioned it to me again. I think he trashed it along with Campbell's letter. It wasn't even found in his files.

Lawrence Bolger:

Harry Hapgood became a dinosaur. His literary career died because he couldn't adapt. The World War II paper shortage killed the pulps, so there went most of his regular markets, and the changes in the genre swept in by John Campbell, H.L. Gold, Frederik Pohl, and other editors made his kind of SF writing unpopular. Raymond Palmer continued to buy his stories for *Amazing* until Palmer, too, left the field in the late '40s. By then, science fiction had grown up.

But Hapgood didn't grow with the genre. His stories were pure romanticism. He paid no attention to scientific accuracy or character development. He persisted in trying to write Buck Rogers stuff. Other writers learned the new rules, changed their styles to fit the times, but Harry Hapgood wouldn't—probably couldn't—change chords. So while Robert Heinlein was creating his "Future History" series and Ted Sturgeon was writing classics like "Baby Is Three," Harry was still trying to get away with space heroes and bug-eyed monsters. The more sophisticated SF mags wouldn't touch that stuff.

It was sad. He still went to science fiction conventions on the East Coast, but he was no longer surrounded by fans. They just didn't want to talk to him anymore.

The magazine editors tried to tell him where he was going wrong, why they weren't buying his stories any more. I remember, at one Science Fiction convention in Philadelphia, overhearing John Campbell patiently trying to explain to Harry that, as long as he persisted in writing stories which claimed that rockets could travel to another solar system in two days or that Jupiter had a surface, he simply could not accept any of Harry's work.

Harry never listened. He stubbornly wanted to play by his own rules. Gregory Benford once criticized science fiction that "plays with the net down," SF stories which ignore basic scientific principles like the theory of Relativity. In Harry Hapgood's case, he was playing on a different court altogether. All he could write were stories in which lizard-men

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kidnapped beautiful women and the Space Navy always saved the day. But he was playing ping-pong among Wimbledon champs, and he wouldn't realize that he was in a new game.

Margo Croft:

After *Rocket Adventures* folded, I went down the street to work as an associate editor at Doubleday, helping to edit their mystery line. That was in '48. I had all but completely withdrawn from the science fiction scene by then, but I still had a few contacts in the field, people with whom I'd touch bases now and then.

Anyway . . . one of Doubleday's whodunnit writers lived in Boston and I occasionally took the train up there to meet with her. On one of those trips I had some time to kill before catching the train back to New York. I had my address book in my purse and Harry's number was written in it, so I called him up and told him I'd buy him lunch downtown. It was mainly for old time's sake, but also I wondered if he had recovered from the collapse of the pulp market. By then, I hadn't seen him in a few years.

Harry wasn't looking good. He had lost weight and he had started chain-smoking. He wore a suit which looked as if it had been new in 1939, and I knew it had to be his best suit. The last time he had made an SF magazine sale had been the year before. He wouldn't admit it, but I knew that he had been trying to pay the bills by writing articles for some furniture trade magazine. It was ironic. Harry, who had practically thrived during the Depression, was on the skids during the postwar boom. Ironic, but not funny.

It was a painful lunch. He didn't want to talk much. He knew I was paying, so he ordered the biggest item on the menu. It was probably the best meal he had eaten in months. I told him that I had married—my first husband, Phillip—and though he tried to take it well, I could see that he was disappointed. I suppose he had noticed that girlish crush I'd had on him ten years before, and was sorry now that he hadn't done anything about it then. *(Shakes her head.)* Poor man.

His personal life was a wreck, so I tried to talk to him about his writing. I told him that Doubleday was starting to publish science fiction and that they were looking for established authors; he should take a crack at it. He didn't say much, and I got the impression that he had lost interest in SF. Somehow that didn't make sense. Harry was a science fiction writer top to bottom. He should have jumped at the chance.

He had stopped at a newsstand before meeting me at the restaurant, and he had picked up a handful of magazines. It was his usual reading matter—all the SF magazines—but in the stack was also the first issue of a new magazine which I had heard about through the grapevine. That

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was *Fate*, the UFO digest that Ray Palmer started publishing after he left *Amazing* to take advantage of the flying saucer craze.

Sure, it was the type of thing which Harry Hapgood would read. Nothing sinister about that. But I remember, over dessert, watching him absently pick it up and thumb through the pages. Then he casually asked me what it would take for him to write a bestseller.

"I'm talking about a science fiction novel," he said. "I mean, something that would sell like crazy."

Coming from Harry Hapgood, that would have been hysterical if it hadn't been so sad. I didn't really think he was capable of writing an SF novel that was even publishable—and it would be years before science fiction scratched the bestseller lists. But I told him that he had answered his own question.

"Write something that a lot of people will want to read," I said. The obvious answer, of course. Harry just nodded his head and kept flipping through *Fate*.

Joe Mackey:

I remember Harry's disappearance very well.

By then I was working as a draftsman for a refrigerator company in Boston, but I still lived downstairs from Harry, in that three-decker in Somerville. I had gotten home from work and was settling down on the couch to read. Harry knocked on my door, stuck his head in, and said that he was going out for ice cream. Did I want to come along? I told him, no, thanks anyway, and so he left. I heard the front door downstairs open and close . . . and that was it. That was the last time I heard from him for five days.

Next morning I went up to his place for coffee before going to work —something I did every morning—and found his door unlocked. His lights were still on, but he was missing. I was a little worried, but I figured, what the hell. I turned off the lights and went to my job. But when I got home that evening and found that he still hadn't returned, I called the police.

Nothing was missing. His suitcase was still in the closet, his toothbrush was still next to the sink in the bathroom, there was even a half-finished furniture article in his typewriter. He had just walked out to get ice cream and . . .*phhtt!* Vanished. The cops searched the neighborhood, thinking he had been mugged, maybe killed and left in an alley somewhere, but there was no trace of him. He hadn't checked into any hospitals and the cab drivers didn't report picking him up anywhere. The newspapers reported his disappearance the next day, as a minor item buried in the back pages. Nobody seemed to be really concerned, though.

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Except me. I was worried sick about the whole thing. Y'know, maybe Harry was going to be found floating in the Charles River or something.

Then . . . well, you know what happened next. He turned up in the boonies of New Hampshire, saying that he had been kidnapped by a flying saucer.

A lone pedestrian, found on Route 202 in Hillsboro, was brought to Hillsboro Police station Tuesday night, after he wandered out of the woods and flagged down a driver. The man, identified as a Somerville, Massachusetts, writer, has been sought by Massachusetts police as a missing person since last week.

Harold LaPierre Hapgood, Jr., 38, of 19 Waterhouse St., Somerville, was found on the roadside near the Antrim town line by the Rev. Lucius Colby, minister of the First Episcopal Church in Henniker. According to Hillsboro Police Chief Cyril G. Slater, Mr. Hapgood stumbled out into the highway in front of the Rev. Colby's automobile, waving his arms and forcing the driver to halt. The Rev. Colby then drove Mr. Hapgood to the Hillsboro police station.

Chief Slater says that Mr. Hapgood, a magazine writer, has been sought by the Somerville, Boston, and Massachusetts state police departments since Friday, May 7, when he apparently vanished after leaving his residence in Somerville. Chief Slater says that although Mr. Hapgood appears to be in good health, he was delirious when brought to his office. Mr. Hapgood claims that he was kidnapped by a space-ship piloted by creatures from another planet . . .

—*Hillsboro News-Register*;
Hillsboro, N.H.
Thursday, May 13, 1948

Lawrence Bolger:

Did Harry Hapgood really get kidnapped by a UFO? Not a chance. If he got kidnapped by anything, it was the Trailways bus he caught at the station in Boston.

When a reporter from one of the Boston papers retraced Hapgood's trail, he found that the driver remembered someone who looked like Harry getting on in Boston and getting off in Keene, New Hampshire. He used false names when he bought the ticket and when he checked into a hotel in Keene for four days, but his description was matched by the bus driver, the hotel clerk and chambermaids, even the waitress at the diner where he ate breakfast and dinner. The only thing which wasn't established was how he got from Keene to Hillsboro, so one can only assume that he hitched a ride . . . and it sure as hell wasn't in a flying saucer.

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It wasn't an iron-clad story at all. Hell, it was a blatant fraud. He didn't have a shred of evidence to support his claim that he had been teleported off the street in Somerville, taken into space in a UFO, and examined by strange little men for four days.

On the other hand, he didn't need any proof. The country was in the midst of its first big flying-saucer flap, started by Kenneth Arnold's sighting of UFOs over Mt. Rainier the year before. There were a lot of true believers like the Fortean Society, and whenever newspapers or the Air Force debunked a sighting or a kidnap story, these people would claim that it was part of a government conspiracy to cover-up the UFO "invasion" or whatever.

Harry Hapgood knew what he was doing. First, he sold a first-hand account of his experience to Ray Palmer at *Fate*. After that story was printed and enough newspapers had written about his "ordeal," he wrote his book and sold it to a minor hardback publisher, changing his byline to H. LaPierre Hapgood so that he wouldn't get confused with H.L. Hapgood, Jr., the pulp writer.

(Laughs). No one noticed the name change, because no one paid any attention to science fiction in those days. The only people who really knew that H. LaPierre Hapgood had started his career as a science fiction hack were SF fans. Since they were considered to be even further out on the fringe than the UFO cultists, no one paid any attention to them.

And what do you know? It became a runaway bestseller . . .

Margo Croft:

The odd thing about Harry's first book is, if you take it as science fiction, it's a pretty good yarn. His narrative skills, developed from all those years of grinding out stories for the pulps, really lent themselves to this sort of thing. It has an almost-convincing sense of realism. I mean, if you checked your skepticism at the door, you could have ended up believing him. And a lot of people did.

If Harry had applied himself to writing science fiction, he could have re-emerged in the field as one of the major writers of the '50s. *(Shrugs.)* But maybe he was fed up with science fiction. I dunno. I guess he was more interested in making money, at that point.

One of the funnier stories about the hoax was that, after *Abducted to Space* was published and made it to the bestseller lists, he got invited to be the commencement speaker at graduation ceremonies at some small liberal-arts college in Illinois. As academic tradition sometimes has it, for his services he was presented an honorary doctorate in astronomy from the school. It didn't mean a damn thing, but Harry and his publisher milked it for all it was worth. So Harry overnight became Dr. H. LaPierre

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Hapgood, the professional astronomer. *(Laughs.)* He didn't even graduate from high school!

When I awoke, I found myself lying in a circular chamber. The walls rose around me as a hemispherical dome, white and featureless except for a pulsing red orb suspended from the apex of the ceiling.

The room seemed to hum, just above the range of audibility. I was lying on a raised platform which seemed to be made out of metal, except that it was soft where I lay. I attempted to move my arms, then my legs, but discovered to my alarm that I was completely paralyzed. Yet there were no visible restraints on my arms or legs.

Then, directly in front of me, a section of the wall faded and became a screen. I saw the black expanse of outer space. In the center of the screen hung Earth, and I realized that I was thousands of miles out in space. I was terrified. How did I get here? What would be done to me? Most importantly, would I ever be released?

A few moments later, a low section of the wall to my right slid upward, and the first of the Aliens slowly walked into the chamber . . .

—H. LaPierre Hapgood;
Abducted To Space

Joe Mackey:

Harry moved out of the place in Somerville as soon as he got the advance money for *Abducted to Space*, but by then he and I weren't on speaking terms. I was pretty upset with him by that time. I thought we were friends, but he had used me to establish credibility for that cock-and-bull story of his. Hell, when the reporters starting showing up to interview him about his experience, he would send them downstairs to interview me as a "reliable source." Of course, they never printed my opinion that he was making the whole thing up. Just the part about how I found his place empty one morning.

So I didn't really mind when he moved out to one of the ritzier parts of Chestnut Hill, but I did keep up with him, from a distance. I'm sure you know a lot of this already, right? After he and his publisher made a mint from *Abducted to Space*, he did *UFO!*, which was just a rehash of the first book, except that he embellished the story a little. Seems he "remembered" a lot of details in his dreams, which he claimed were buried in his subconscious by the aliens. That's a lot of horseshit—excuse my French—because I could see he was just recycling stuff from his old pulp stories. Probably had his copies of *Thrilling Wonder* and *Amazing* right there on his desk when he was writing the thing.

It was after he put out *Odd Visitors*, the third book, that he really went for the nugget. He started that UFO cult of his—whachacallit, the

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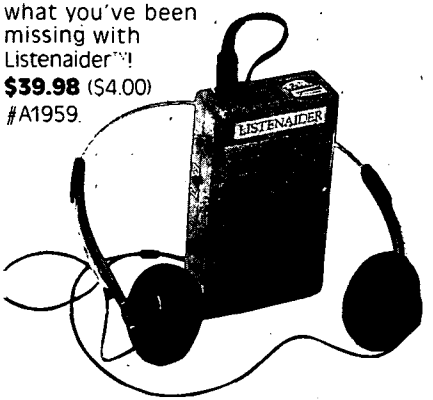

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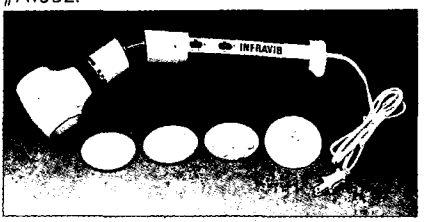

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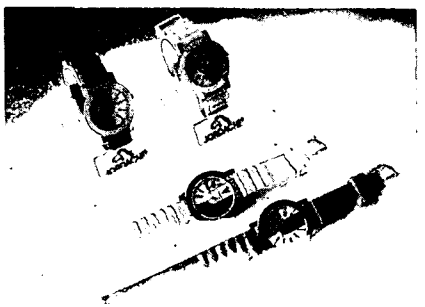

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International Center For Extraterrestrial Studies—and soon had every dingbat in the country sending him donations. Ten dollars got you a mimeographed newsletter every couple of months, and a hundred bucks put you on a list of "honorary contactees."

The money was supposedly going for the construction of a "UFO spaceport" on some land he had purchased out in the western part of the state. The line was that, when the spacearks arrived, they would land at the spaceport and take aboard human passengers for a voyage to another planet, which Harry called Nirvanos. Complete crap—but, y'know, there's a lot of mixed-up people out there who'll buy into just that sort of thing.

My wife and I drove out there one Sunday to check it out. Found a three-acre plot in Leicester, off a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. Just a big cleared cow pasture, surrounded by a barb-wire fence with an empty shack in the middle and a big billboard at the end. It had some weird symbols painted on it and was strung with Christmas lights. Some local kid was hired to switch them on each night. And that was his spaceport.

I bet Harry spent no more than five hundred dollars on the thing . . . and he probably took a million to the bank, in donations from a lot of sick, gullible folks.

I can't tell you how much I despised the son of a bitch.

Margo Croft:

Harry dropped out of sight for about a dozen years, and while he did the UFO craze of the '50s ran its course. By the time Alan Shepard went up in space, flying saucers were a joke. The company which put out Harry's three UFO books went under—I think the publisher went to jail for tax fraud—and no respectable house would touch the ravings of Dr. H. LaPierre Hapgood. He kept his UFO cult going for a little while longer, after he moved it to Mexico to escape the IRS, but eventually it ran out of steam. On occasion I heard scuttlebutt about some millionaire American expatriate who had made his money writing UFO books, now living in a mansion-compound just outside of Mexico City, and never seen by outsiders. I knew who he was, and I didn't give a damn.

Then it was 1965, and I had left Doubleday and was starting my own literary agency. I wanted to take on some science fiction writers as clients, so I started hitting the major SF conventions, trying to find the next Robert Heinlein or Isaac Asimov. I found myself at an SF convention in the Chicago area, in a private party filled with the hot young writers of the day—Roger Zelazny, Harlan Ellison, Larry Niven, some others I can't recall. The hotel room was crowded and smoke-filled, so I went in search of a quiet corner of the room. And when I got there, I found Harry Hapgood.

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He was old, old before his time. I was only a few years younger than him, but he seemed *(long pause)* so wasted. Used up, like something had been sucking blood out of him for fifteen years. If he was a millionaire, it didn't show. His clothes looked like they had been bought off the rack at Woolworth's, and he was so thin, so pale . . . I might not have recognized him if it hadn't been for his nametag.

"H.L. Hapgood, Jr." it read. He had gone back to his old byline, but if anyone had recognized his name, they didn't want to meet him. "Hapgood" was a foul name to conjure in SF circles. Science fiction writers and fans had long been misassociated by the general public with the UFO crazies, just as they're now lumped in with the New Age crystal-freaks. H.L. Hapgood was the name of one of their own, a writer who had turned Quisling and sold out to the lunatic fringe. In a crowded party, he was all alone. I couldn't believe that he had dared to show his face at an SF convention.

He recognized me at once. He might have even been waiting for me. I wanted to turn and walk away. But then he said my name, and I stayed. I sat down on the windowsill next to his chair, and listened to a dying old man.

He said . . .

(Sighs). I'm sorry. I can't go on. Will you turn off the recorder now, please?

"I've been asked, 'Why did you try, when you knew 99 percent of the people wouldn't believe you?' My reply, when it wasn't self-incriminating to answer the question, was simple. 'You're missing the point,' I said. "It doesn't matter if 99 percent of the people won't believe you. It only takes the remaining 1 percent to make you a rich man.'

"I have done many terrible things to become rich, and I won't apologize for all of them. The New Hampshire hoax was only the first of many. I have deceived and manipulated countless people. I have no regrets about bilking total strangers for their money. If they were silly enough to send me money for the privilege of hearing more of my lies, then they deserved what they received. You get what you pay for.

"Yet, for those whose friendship I betrayed, I feel a vast, unspeakable shame. The wealth I reaped is a poor substitute for the friends I have lost. The debt I owe them can never be repaid, even by the division of my estate.

"The greater part of my estate, though, I bequeath to Minnesota State University, for the continuance of its English department's science fiction research program. My actions have tarnished the genre. Perhaps this will help to make amends. However, there is no reason why the program should be blackened by the name of a liar, which is why this donation will be made anonymously.

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"As for my three UFO books, I commend them to death. I have appointed Margo Croft to be my literary executor, and she has been instructed to make sure that they are never again reprinted. They will follow me into the grave, never again to rot anyone's mind.

"As for my remaining works . . . Margo, you may do with them as you please."

—Harold L. Hapgood, Jr.
Last will and testament
(Recorded July 28, 1966)

Lawrence Bolger:

Shortly after Harry Hapgood's funeral, the University sent a couple of graduate researchers from the SF program down to Mexico, to visit Hapgood's mansion. They went along with Margo Croft, who had yet to set foot in Harry's house, even though the two of them had reached sort of a reconciliation just before he died. Both our students and Margo were interested in the same thing, the vague reference to "remaining work" Hapgood had alluded to in his will.

Outside the high walls of the compound, a few of Harry's remaining followers were still holding vigil—wild-haired old ladies clutching frayed copies of *Abducted to Space*, intense young men with madness lurking behind their eyes, a smiling married couple wearing aluminum-foil spacesuits, waiting for Harry's spaceark to arrive and carry them to the promised land in the sky. Within the mansion, men were packing in crates his furniture and belongings—jade and porcelain vases, Spanish iron sculptures, Elizabethan tapestries—in preparation for Sotheby's auction of the estate. As Hapgood had directed, the house itself and its grounds would be donated to Mexico for a mental institute. Perhaps this was a final, wry joke on his part.

Margo and the researchers found Harry's office virtually untouched. Only the lawyers had been in there, to retrieve the file cabinets containing Harry's financial records. There was another file cabinet in the office, though, and a desk; in the drawers, they found the last literary work of H.L. Hapgood, Jr.

They counted sixty-four short stories and three novels: meticulously typed, almost all completed, and none previously published. All had been written since the early 1950s, most in the last few years of his life when Harry had been fighting his cancer. All science fiction . . . not a UFO book in the whole bunch. Enough writing to fill a career.

Yet there were no rejection slips in the files, nor were there copies of cover letters. No indication that Harry had ever submitted any of these stories to magazine or book publishers. It was as if he would write a

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story, then simply stash it away and start another one. Hapgood had lived alone; there had been no one to read his work.

Why? *(Shrugs.)* Who knows? Maybe he couldn't face rejection . . . he didn't want to see any of those stories come back in the mail. But they were good stories, nonetheless. Hapgood had obviously learned something about writing in the intervening years.

You know the rest, of course. Margo brought the manuscripts back to New York, and one of her clients culled the best short stories from the stack, edited them into a posthumous collection, and managed to get it published. The damn thing's been selling like crazy ever since. *(Laughs.)* Perhaps Harry's legion of UFO cultists is still out there, loyally buying multiple copies from the bookstores. That's the only explanation I have for the new book getting on the New York *Times* bestseller list last week. And now the same publisher is going to issue his novels in a uniform edition. They'll probably become bestsellers, too. So go figure . . .

So who got the last laugh? Maybe this is Harry's final revenge. His place in the genre's history has been revised, and hardly anyone out there remembers the New Hampshire hoax. That's the conventional wisdom. But, y'know, he didn't survive to see his new acceptance in the field. Literary success doesn't do you much good if you're dead, right?

Look at it this way. Harry always said that the UFOs were coming back to get him. And he was right. The flying saucers got him in the end. ●

LIZARD

Star-spawn with an alien's
Glittering eye . . . Remembering fins,
Your sideways legs crook strangely.
Brother, use what you have and race on by.
Spine-fingered, sizzling zigzag fuse
Of haste, you shake the silent sun.
Survival: getting a grip on
Noon's heat-shimmering boulders,
Or sleeping winters cold as bone.
You've learned to travel light,
Dropping your whipping tail to feed a foe.
Hard-scrabble and bravado—
Puffing, your brilliant throat
Flashes a sky-blue taunt.

—Georgette Perry

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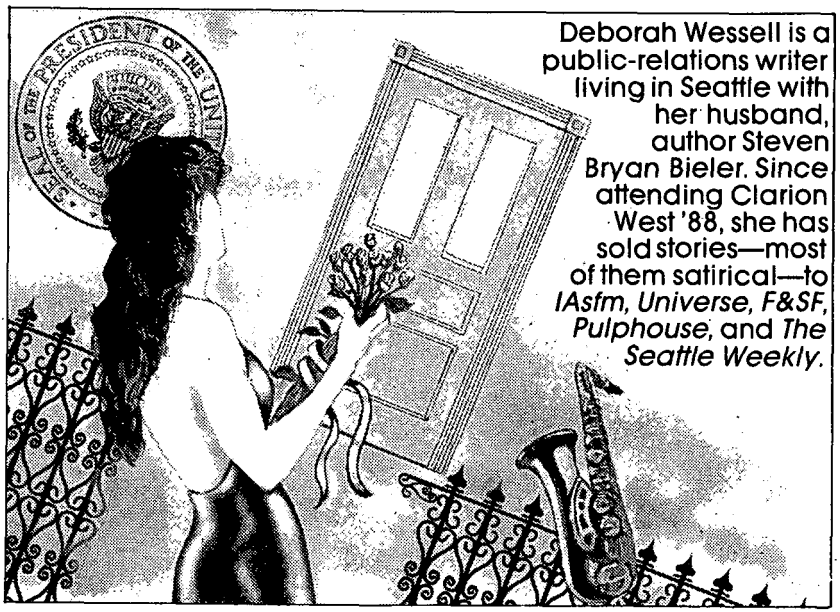
TIME CONSIDERED AS A HELIX OF LAVENDER RIBBON



Deborah Wessell is a public-relations writer living in Seattle with her husband, author Steven Bryan Bieler. Since attending Clarion West '88, she has sold stories—most of them satirical—to *IAsfm*, *Universe*, *F&SF*, *Pulphouse*, and *The Seattle Weekly*.

by Deborah Wessell

art: Will Brown

Esmerelda Burnchurch, wealthy, willowy, and brimful of champagne, is not nearly as tipsy as she was an hour ago. An hour ago, the recently sacked Time Czar Maxfield Singh broke the laws of God and man by sneaking her into Temp Central at two in the morning, without a plan or a permit or even a chauffeur.

Now, wavering at her own doorstep at dawn, feverish even in her gossamer gown, Esmerelda is very near to fainting daintily away beneath the boxwood hedge.

But not from champagne. From shock.

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Because Maxie has actually done it: he's Tripped her to the precise moment she described to him, weeping pearly tears onto the lapels of his tuxedo at that revolting Inaugural Ball. There's the door of her old townhouse in New Francisco, there's the six-years-ago sun about to come up, there's the coffee boy floating along the avenue on his magbike, slinging sacks of espresso onto the porches of the rich and famous.

And here on Esmerelda's porch, in all their delicate extravagance, are the roses which will convince her six-years-ago self, any moment now, to elope with Nicholas Carletta instead of merging fortunes with his rival, Charles Devereaux-Brown.

Esmerelda sways against the iron filigree railing and tries to think. A breeze stirs the lavender ribbon in her waterfall hair and she yawns, inflating herself with morning to chase the champagne fumes away. Perhaps she's dreaming?

No. It's all too prosaic, and too precise. Door, sun, roses. An opportunity to repair the past. Just what she told Maxie she wanted, and just what he drunkenly vowed to give her. She has four minutes to undo the dreadful error of throwing over Charles, her ambitious, industrious, soon-to-be-senior-senator suitor, in favor of erratic, eccentric, never-to-be-anybody-but-a-saxophone player Nick. Now Charles is going to be President. Nick still isn't anybody, and Esmerelda wants to be First Spouse so much she can taste it.

"But I never expected to make it happen."

Her voice, too, sounds strangely mundane. Of course: no force field echo. Esmerelda has gone Tripping before, naturally. Everyone in her set has. The usual round, Columbus rowing ashore, Stonehenge at some ancient solstice, the Sermon on the Mount. But what with the roaring distortion of the force field, which keeps the tourists from mucking up destiny, and the five-centuries-and-earlier rule, and the vast expense and the vaster paperwork, and the stingy little snippet of time that you're actually Back Then, surrounded by extremely tall and tedious guards—it isn't really all that much fun. Pharaohs, triceratops, Big Bang, ho hum.

But *this*. This is her own destiny, and nothing to stop her tampering, not for two or three more minutes. Esmerelda is abruptly queasy. She lifts the exquisite porcelain vase, hauls out the bouquet—pink sweetheart roses, a special favorite that Nick somehow remembered and Charles always forgot—and heroically tips a cascade of icy water down the cleavage of her gown.

The shock sets her gasping but clears her mind. Time for business. Nick is wrong for her, it's too bad, but there it is. His eccentric charm is wearing thin, even though they still have fun in bed. (Or did, until Charles' nomination underscored her second thoughts.) Life isn't just saxophones and sex, after all, and to reign in the White House with a

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strong, compelling man like Charles—well, that will be a life. And surely she and Nick can manage an affair, very discreetly. No, Nicky wouldn't, he's idiotically ethical.

And romantic, in his own glib way. (Esmerelda cradles the roses in one arm.) But she's still going to thumbprint her wristband—Max's contraband wristband—and she and the flowers will flicker straight back to Temp Central and a life with the world's elite. (Rather trite, really, setting flowers at the doorway in the dead of night.) No bouquet in the morning will mean no fond thoughts of Nick uppermost in her six-years-ago mind. (The roses gleam like damask in the dawn.) No fond thoughts, no argument with Charles when she finds out he's had his secretary select their wedding rings. (She brushes her lips across the furled petals.) No argument, no impetuous telepix call to Nick. (The roses smell like raspberries, like wine.) No call, no golden afternoon on the cliffs above the sea, making love and gazing into his sea-green eyes. (The roses—

WHAP! An espresso sack sails over the hedge and smacks the steps at Esmerelda's feet. She jumps, heart slamming, and the empty vase cartwheels to the ground and cracks in two like a porcelain egg. The coffee boy floats off without a glance, but a light appears in the casement window overhead. Esmerelda can hear footsteps on the oak staircase inside. She remembers now, a sudden noise woke her that morning and she came down to discover—

Nick's ridiculous roses. The vase lies in pieces at Esmerelda's feet, the roses are loose in the crook of her arm. She slips the lavender ribbon from her hair and binds it around the stems, remembering as she does so that she's always kept that ribbon because Nick gave it to her, tied around an armful of pink sweetheart roses . . .

The spiraling thought makes Esmerelda dizzy, and the Trip makes her dizzier still, as she sets down the roses and gathers up the vase and flickers into her future with the broken pieces in her hands. ●

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READING LESSON

The Inca Atahualpa asked the scribe
To write "God" on his thumbnail, black on pink,
Showed it to his captors one by one,
And had them read. Each spoke the word aloud,
Pronouncing it, each of them, alike.
It gave the Sapa Inca great delight,
For in Peru (called Tahuantinsuyu
Before the Fall) no one wrote.

And then he tried Pizarro, who stood mute:
Born a bastard, boyhood tending swine,
For thirty years he'd torn through the New World,
Serving men who thought they could claim oceans,
Seeking the birthright that he'd never found.
He'd not had time to waste attending school.
No more than Atahualpa could he read
But he knew the meaning of a room filled with gold.

Illiteracy got Atahualpa in this fix
When he threw down Father Valverde's Bible because
He could make nothing of it. "He's no more able
To know the word of Christ than any dog!"
The priest told Pizarro. "Attack and I'll absolve you!"
Magic words. "Santiago!" the soldiers cried
And set to slaughter. Later Valverde devoted
Hours to the conversion of the kidnapped Inca

With no success. After the ransom was paid
They garroted the Inca in the square of Cajamarca
Where nine months before they'd engendered a new age
By murdering six thousand unarmed men
Whose blood still stained the stones. Now came the birth.
They christened Atahualpa "John" in honor of the Baptist
And then they slipped the cord around his neck
And twisted it until he couldn't breathe.

Did he understand then the power of the written word
To justify man's ways to God, to make
A hell of heaven, give appetite a sanction?
Well that's all over now, and life goes on.
We keep the room where gold was piled high.
It's empty now. "Santiago" means "Saint James save us."
The peasants grow coca to earn their bread.
Pizarro never learned to read or write.

—John Kessel

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GREEN

by Ian MacLeod

Ian MacLeod lives in the West Midlands in England with his wife Gillian. He has sold stories to *Interzone* and *Weird Tales.* The following story marks his first appearance in the pages of *IAsfm.*

art: Linda Burr

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There are many kinds of pest in a garden. Thrips and greenfly. Flea beetles, fairies, and fungi. Manslugs that nibble leaf-heraldry to mark the territory of their bearded king. Leatherjackets. Mealy bugs. An unmarshaled army bickering to bore a ripening fruit or wither a well-formed stem.

Mark knew them all. Their names had been his early words. His first memory was horror at the broken, weeping flesh of a blighted tomato. His second, the garden of his parents' cottage in the row at the south east corner of my Lord Widder's estate. Sitting in sunshine with the drone of the bees. Roses nodding with the weight of summer. The tawny wall. Everything high above, and the hot sky furthest of all, beyond reach even if he could persuade his legs to stand. Then there was movement. Something quick and brown. And there again; sheen of wings and ivory flicker of eyes and teeth in the wall shadow beneath the roses where plumes of lavender scented the air. He watched the tiny figure, something that moved in a world even wider and brighter than his own. Its movements were wild and sharp, like a bird's, hands darting to tuck the furry globes of lavender and push them into a tiny slung pouch. Its head flickered this way and that, looking for danger, and watching Mark, his presence, weighing up the threat.

Brownie. Mark knew the word. A brownie. And even then his gardener's instincts told him that this one was benign, that the lavender would thrive regardless of its attention. Mark wasn't sure what he did next. Maybe he laughed, perhaps he reached out a hand, but quick as a blink, the brownie was gone.

The wall shrank in a flurry of years until Mark could sit dangling his feet in the high grass on the far side. In the settling warmth of late afternoons, he would watch that special place amid the tunnel shadows of the orchard where the track from the estate gardens turned into sight. From the open kitchen window in the cottage behind, the clip of the chopping board, steam and the smell of vegetables seemed to draw his father into view, the hobble of his walk, the hump of his leather apron slung across his left shoulder.

Mark remembered the flash of excitement. Turning to call inside to his mother across the little stretch of their garden. And when he thought of those times, when he grew maudlin and tried to make sense of these things, he would always struggle to prolong that glance back through the open window, to penetrate the cooking shadows of the kitchen and glimpse the woman who breathed and lived and hummed to herself there. But even when he forced his mind into fantasy, she remained hidden by the play of summer light. A vague movement, nothing more than the shape of a cloud seen at night on a river. That was his sole memory of his mother.

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In later years when he and his father were alone, he'd try to get him to talk about her. But his father's face would cloud with the same puzzlement that Mark recognized within himself. His lips would shape wordless sounds as though he too had lost his memories. And eventually, one way or another, he'd always tell the same story. How they'd honeymooned at the coast, walked the promenade in fresh new clothes like a couple of swells. A stall with striped awnings had offered daguerreotypes for a pound a throw and they'd stood out in the salt air, debating whether to have their likenesses taken. But it was almost all the money they had and the need for a meal and perhaps even a drink before they went back to the boarding house won the day. So, to his father's bitter regret, he had no face in a frame to remind him of the life he'd lost.

Mark and his father were close, sharing their forgetful grief, caring haphazardly for the cottage and each other, and, above all, responding to the growth of all things leafed, all things that came from the earth, all things green. Mark went to the school by the chestnut tree in the vale, but the other children found him vague and aloof. Not friend, nor enemy, nor prey. So Mark stood apart from the dusty rabble at playtime and participated woodenly in the organized games. His real lessons took place at home, with his father.

Their own cottage garden was small but, like the intricate petals of a rose, opened layer upon layer of wonder. In the evenings, free from school and work, they tended and watered, often so deep into the twilight that the soil became a dark mist in their hands. And his father, working in the big estate, clipping and hoeing for my Lord Widder, would sometimes bring home a gaudy broken bloom, a vegetable too huge for the pot yet still rejected as a dwarf in the competition greenhouses, or even—as with the blighted tomato—object lessons in decay and disease.

One day in autumn, his father trudged home through brown gusts of leaves and placed a barred wooden trap down on the kitchen table. Then he struck a lamp and held it close so that Mark could see what it was that whimpered and scurried inside.

"I stopped them from dropping this one in the water butt," he said, crouching down to level his face with Mark and the edge of the table. "Thought you might want to see it."

The creature put its hands to the bars and peered out, a prisoner in a tiny jail. It had damaged its wings in an initial attempt to escape; greenish-blue, they trailed at its back like torn scraps of paper. But now it seemed resigned to its confinement and tilted its head to watch as Mark and his father talked.

"Now, this is called a ferrish. They gather acorns, which no one minds." His father reached out and prodded a calloused finger, dark with ingrained dirt. The creature backed away from the bars. "But they torment

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the horses in the stables, though only the Devil knows exactly why and he isn't telling. My Lord Widder will not have his prize mounts tormented."

"Can I keep it?" Mark asked. "Keep it as a pet?"

His father shook his head. "It's a thing from the wild. Doesn't belong here with us any more than you or I belong up a tree."

"But please . . . "

Mark was uncharacteristically pleading and insistent. Although he didn't realize it, he was a lonely child at heart, withdrawing from the companionship of schoolfriends and the people on the estate as much from fear as from self-sufficiency. He could just picture the ferrish sitting—after weeks of slow and careful persuasion—on his shoulder like a magical parrot. The fun they would have together! The games!

Reluctantly, his father agreed.

Mark hurried into the deepening evening. He waded carelessly through the dead leaves and wind-flattened nettles that stretched down from the bottom of the garden to the misting river and retrieved the rabbit hutch that had lain there since the half-forgotten demise of Bobbity the year before. Brushing woodlice from its sides, he carried the big, awkward box back into the kitchen.

As his father stoked up the fire and chopped carrots and onions for dinner, Mark used his precocious skills as a maker to tack back the warped boards and tighten the loose mesh at the front. He worked on his knees on the worn firelit rug and the ferrish stared down at him from the table through the bars of the trap. He screwed doweling rods in as perches, scattered a few handfuls of straw and filled Bobbity's old bowl in the corner with water. It was dark now outside and food—acorns, he supposed—would have to wait until morning.

Mark surveyed his work on the hutch, taking proud, stew-scented breaths of the dim kitchen air. But he was unwilling to lift the trap and asked his father to take it down from the table.

"Slowly does it." His father wiped potato peelings from his hands and slid back the door of the trap, pressing it against the wider entrance to the hutch.

The ferrish cowered at the back, reluctant to come out. His father gave the little box a tap, then a gentle shake. Just as Mark was leaning down to peer inside, the ferrish flew from the trap, then, before he could close the door, out of the hutch again and into the kitchen.

Its chest heaving with a breathy, whistling sound, it perched on top of the frame of an old engraving by the closed door. Mark and his father moved towards it, their arms outstretched like zombies. Before they could close around the ferrish, it flitted between them and circled the room twice in quick and silent flight before swerving towards the window and

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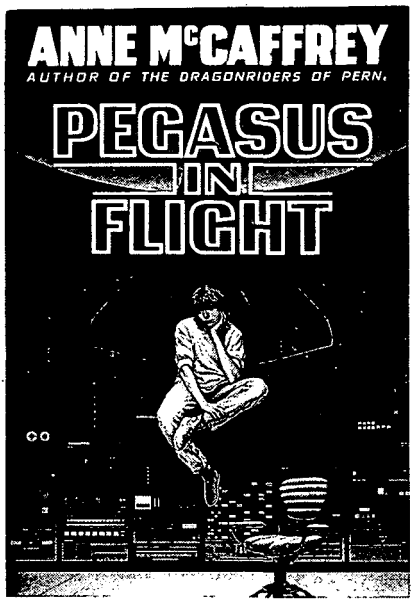

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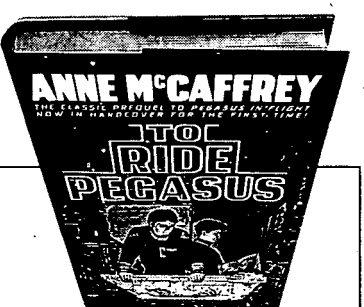

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bumping into the pane like a heavy moth. It fluttered to the floor and dragged itself towards a chair leg, briefly out of reach of their clasping hands. Slowly, quietly, they circled around both sides of the kitchen table, but the ferrish climbed into the air again, settling awkwardly on the stone rim of the sink. Back bent, body palpitating, wings bedraggled, it regarded them balefully as they approached once more.

The closer of the two, Mark scraped a chair out of the way and moved towards it, trying to look trustworthy, gentle. It obviously had little energy left.

"It's all right," he whispered. "Nothing to be afraid of."

The creature took off, batting by chance against Mark's outstretched hand. He felt the quick warmth clawing against his palm, but before he could close his fingers it was away.

Mark span around in time to see the ferrish dart towards the fire. The chimney, he thought. Of course, the chimney! But instead of flying upwards into the smoke drifting darkness and freedom, the ferrish dived into the heat.

There was a scream—neither of pain nor joy, but like the wind in the treetops on a wild night—and the flames briefly brightened. Then there was only stillness, and the rattle of the teakettle as it came slowly to the boil.

The ferrish's death was a sad lesson for Mark to learn. He carried the guilt with him for all of that winter; a long time for someone so young when the dark months stretch like a stony road lit only by the brightness of Christmas, holly berries and the occasional appearance of an impertinent mushroom. But it taught him that even in a garden, even in my Lord Widder's planned and regimented estate, there were many things that were wild, things that were free.

The earth awoke again. Summer followed spring, and Mark's reputation as a loner increased. In those precious hours when there was no school and little urgent work to be done in the garden at home, he would wander and explore the endless grounds of the Widder estate. There were, of course, strict rules as to where the young son of an under gardener could go—many of the workers lived out their whole lives on the estate without ever even glimpsing the distant, stately white porticos of the great house. These rules Mark never deliberately disobeyed. If he knew a place was forbidden, a laurel or an ivy wall that represented a boundary which only certain privileged gardeners were permitted to cross, he would turn away along less sacrosanct paths. He wandered, avoiding the gardeners and laborers who, seeing him in any part of the estate without any obvious purpose, invariably asked just what he thought he was doing. And, sometimes, he got lost.

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In strange and unexplored parts of the garden, the distinctions between the permitted and the outlawed became deliciously vague. Not knowing whether he was allowed to be there was part of the joy of discovering new places, of getting lost, of crossing a stepping stone stream into a bluebell wood, of finding a marble chair engraved with seahorses overlooking a waterfall in a ferny dell.

Lord Widder's birthday in July was always a special day. In celebration, the entire estate was permitted a day of rest, something that never happened on Sundays and holy days despite the injunctions of the clergy. Then, there were always urgent tasks to be done in the garden, and of course the estate employees used what time they could to work for themselves on their own plots and houses. But, unlike God, when my Lord Widder decreed a day of rest, he meant it. And woe betide anyone found doing anything more strenuous than lifting a mug of tea.

So Mark set out across the orchard after breakfast with the whole day blissfully ahead of him. It was still early, but the sun was strong through the branches, the grass dry underfoot. Off down the slope to his left in the bowl of the valley where the prize Widder sheep grazed, the spire of Saint Pepper's, one of the estate churches, rose from a cluster of cottages and trees to prick the haze. The ave bell struck once, rippling the still air. Saint Pepper's and all the other churches throughout the estate would continue to strike the hour and half hour until dusk. When my Lord Widder had been much, much younger, the strike enumerated the years of his life, but now and for many years the stars came out before a full account could be given.

Through the white gate and along the raised track between the asparagus beds. Past the greenhouses. And more greenhouses. And yet more. A crystal garden on all sides, mirroring the flash of the sky. Inside, thick growths of cucumber and tomato billowed and clawed the glass like prisoners. Further on, stepping over hosepipes and wheelbarrows left in uncharacteristic abandon by workers careless in the knowledge that no one would be out to inspect their labors, greenhouse after greenhouse was filled with grapevines. Mark knew as well as any gardener that there were plenty of species of grape that could be grown outside on a south facing wall, but my Lord Widder was said to prefer the softer, sweeter texture of the more delicate varieties. Following the track between the greenhouses, Mark wondered how anyone, even an aristocrat, could eat so many grapes.

He eventually reached the mountainous privet hedge that marked the outermost boundary of the formal gardens. Here, the silence was still more obvious; on almost any other day of the year the privateers would be up on their ladders, clipping and trimming. Mark's father always said

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they were the happiest of all the workers on the estate. Privet suffers from few pests and seldom dies if properly mulched. It simply grows.

Mark followed the long shadow of the hedge to a white gate set in it like a door in a wall. He went through, down the dim tunnel under the hedge, thinking, although he'd only seen them in books, of a train racing under a hill towards a widening speck of light. Savoring the moment, he emerged into the heat.

Off in the distance, Saint Pepper's chimed another year of Lord Widder's life. The differing pitches of two other estate churches echoed from other directions moments later.

He was on familiar ground here. The mile-long avenue stretched from the perimeter, decked out with roses, dahlias and comical red hot pokers, leading him to a circular lake of grass centered by a great stone bird bath big enough to wash a griffon. This was one of his favorite places. From it, like doors leading from a giant hall, paths opened into the mysteries of the garden.

He took the way downhill through long grass and copses of oak. As the sun climbed, the trees gathered in larger masses, darker and thicker, until gradually, like falling into a dream, Mark found that they were all around him, over his head, shutting out all but splinters of the sun.

His toes stubbed upraised roots. Ropes of ivy tumbled into his face. The path was tentative and meandering, but the dense undergrowth gave him little choice but to follow. There was no birdsong, little noise but the faint sea murmur overhead. Mark gazed around in puzzled wonder as he walked, his gardener's instincts in turmoil. Never before had he seen a place where things were simply left to grow. Not checked, or weeded or staked or deadheaded or pruned.

The whisper of the topmost branches only added to the stillness. He jumped at the sound of a woodpecker hammering in the green shadows. As the path wound on between massive trunks and nettles, he stepped over a trail of marching ants. A squirrel darted up an oak and regarded him as it cleaned its whiskers, and further on he saw a half dozen manslugs chomping the succulent stems of a clump of wild rhubarb. Unafraid, they raised their heads towards him as he passed, their wet, fronded mouths gaping open as if they were about to break into song.

Then Mark saw a sea-horse. He stopped and stared. It was a little way off the track, swaying gently to and fro in the dreaming heat of the forest, its tail twined around a branch. He worked his way around towering foxgloves to get a better look. Sensing his presence, the sea-horse rippled its fins and drifted slowly, unconcernedly, into the air. Its scales, caught in a ribbon of sunlight, flashed rainbows. Entranced, Mark waded on through the undergrowth.

The sea-horse drifted ahead, unhurried. Mark stumbled after, his

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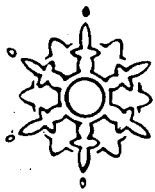

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hands outstretched like a baby clutching for a bubble. A sea-horse of the air! Even after the experience with the ferrish, there was still a large part of him that wanted to touch, to understand.

Reaching a particularly thick stretch of bramble, the sea-horse floated high and over. Pushing his way blindly through, Mark suddenly felt the ground shoot from under him. He fell, down and out into brilliant sunlight.

Scratched, stung and muddied, he climbed out from the ankle-deep water of a ditch and looked around. He was in some unknown part of the landscaped gardens—the sea-horse had vanished. Then, ahead between a screen of holly, something bright flashed. Mark ran towards it, and found himself teetering at the stone lip of a wide pool. Carp glistened like gold in the shade beneath the lilies. Around the edge a boy was riding a bicycle. He tinkled his bell. Polished chrome sparked.

"Hey!"

Mark stepped out of the way in surprise, but the boy pulled up and dismounted.

He was about Mark's age, but fairer skinned and slightly taller: Freckles splattered his cheeks and joined in a dark stripe across his nose. The clothes he wore were almost as scruffy as Mark's, but still Mark could see they were conspicuously better made.

"And just who are you?"

Mark stammered his name.

"Adrian Widder."

The boy held out his hand. Mark had never shaken hands before, but he took it anyway.

"Not the left hand, stupid. The right. Like this."

"I see."

"Would you like a go on my bike? I don't mind."

Mark glanced down at the smooth lines, the bright red frame, the cream mudguards. "I can't ride."

"You can't do much, can you?"

Mark shrugged.

"Do you want to learn? I mean, anyone can do it as long as they're not an absolute and complete moron."

"Wouldn't mind."

They fell into step together, the wheels of the bicycle ticking and flashing between them.

The boy said, "It's easiest on the big lawn, softer if you fall. Up here, through the rose garden."

"Did you say your name was Widder?" Mark asked.

"Yes, I just told you. Adrian Widder. Are you this stupid naturally or do you take lessons?"

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Mark ignored the taunt. He'd realized already that the boy didn't mean to hurt. "You can't be . . . Lord Widder . . . can you?"

"That's my father."

"It's his birthday."

"When?"

"Today."

"How do you know that?"

"Everyone on the estate knows," Mark said, glad that he was able to put Adrian right on something. "It's a special day. You must have heard the bells tolling."

Adrian shook his head. "Mother will have given him some present from me, I suppose. He's not here, anyway. Spends most of his time up in the capital with the King. The King needs him a lot."

"What for?"

"To fight, that sort of thing. Father's a great swordsman. I've read it in the papers."

They walked on through the rose garden. The bicycle tires sighed in the gravel. The bees droned. An easy silence fell between them, the sort that didn't demand to be filled by pointless words. For no reason he could easily explain, Mark liked Adrian Widder. He recognized another loner, and their mutual shyness had been overcome by the sheer accident of their meeting. There was no pressure, no reason why they should get on. Nobody *expected* them to be friends. And somehow, without trying, it became easy.

"Well, here we are." Adrian creaked open a gate in a wall.

Mark followed him through.

And stopped.

Adrian turned. "What is it? Come on!"

Mark stepped slowly across rich turf. Ahead in the midday sun, an immense lawn rolled on and on and on. And in the distant green shimmered the spires and domes of something that was too vast, too ornate to called simply a building.

"That's the house," Adrian said offhandedly. "Haven't you ever seen a house before? Now, do you want to learn to ride or not?"

Mark did.

Adrian held the handlebars as Mark climbed on.

Mark fell off.

They tried again and again, Adrian shoving at the saddle to get him going and Mark's feet clawing uselessly at the pedals. And, every time, he fell off, down into the softness and the scent of the grass. It all happened so simply, so predictably, that they began to chuckle, then to laugh. Jaws aching, wiping tears from their eyes and noses, they continued. And the dogged stupidity of their repeated actions—Mark getting on,

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Mark falling off, Mark getting on again—made their laughter even better, even worse. Eventually, they had to lie down on the lawn, giggling in helpless spasms.

Mark was the first to recover. He sniffed, wiped his nose on the back of his hand, picked up the bicycle. Shoulders still shaking, Adrian propped himself up on his elbows to watch. Mark pushed off.

For once, his feet locked on the pedals. Miraculously, the bicycle started to roll forwards under him. He pedaled faster. The ground flashed by. It was wonderful, like flying. It could only be magic that kept the thing from falling over.

"Look!" he yelled. "Look at me!"

He glanced back towards Adrian, then gently tilted the handlebars to turn. Immediately, the bicycle became a wild thing again. It bucked, tossing him high into the air. The grass slammed into his face, a pedal banged his shin. They both started to laugh again.

As the afternoon flowed across the great blue sky, Mark learned—slowly and somewhat painfully—how to turn corners, how to start and, trickiest of all, how to stop. And gradually they moved down the lawn towards the house.

At about three, a dark-suited man emerged from a far door in a distant corner of the house and walked slowly over to them. Stretched on the grass as Adrian shot back and forth to demonstrate how to freewheel, Mark watched him advance. He was carrying a tray, and on it were tumblers and a huge jug of something that looked green and thirst-quenching.

Adrian skidded to a halt. "Well done, Lawrence."

Lawrence placed the tray on the grass and looked at Mark oddly. Beads of sweat twinkled in the sunlight on his bald head. "I thought I should bring a glass for your friend as well."

"He's learning to ride my bicycle."

"I see . . . " Lawrence straightened up and began to walk slowly back towards the house. His bottom wobbled with each step. Mark and Adrian collapsed again into aching laughter. It was too painful, quite beyond the joke.

A short while later, as Mark was coming to terms with the discovery that the bicycle would continue to move even if you didn't pedal, the great French windows in the domed center of the house opened in a flash of sunlight.

Mark stopped the bicycle and dropped his feet from the pedals.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Mother."

She was a lady dressed in white, carrying a white parasol. Even through the ghostly shimmer of the heat, Mark could tell she was beau-

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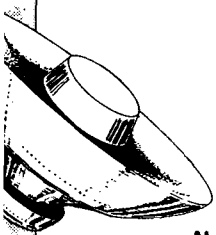

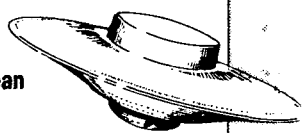

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tiful. His thoughts struggled once again with the gaping memory of his own mother, the shadows inside that open kitchen window when he looked back from the wall. Please, he thought, make this the way she was.

"What a lovely day," she said, her clear voice and smile carrying ahead as she approached.

"This is Mark," Adrian said. "We met up at the fish pool. He's my friend."

"How do you do." She stopped in front of Mark and held out her hand. Still astride the bicycle, Mark felt stupid and awkward. But he knew which hand to offer.

"Hello," he said. Her hand felt strong and cool. "Your, um, lady."

She smiled again, her lovely face framed in the shade of the parasol. Her eyes were blue. They widened in gentle amusement. "Just hello is plenty," she said.

She glanced toward Adrian—who was brushing grass from his knees and standing up—then back toward Mark. "Can you cycle well?"

Mark grinned. "I couldn't at all until Adrian taught me."

"Just today?"

"Yes, just today."

"Congratulations, master Mark. You live on the estate?"

"Number three of the cottages up past the main orchards. My, er, father, he's an under gardener."

"What does he do?"

"Mostly berry fruits, I think. Some vegetables."

"It must be lovely, being a gardener, getting things to grow. Is that what you'd like to be?"

Mark nodded. No other option had ever occurred to him.

"You've got something stuck in your hair." She leaned forward. "Here." Close to, almost sharing the shade of the parasol, Mark could smell her scent. By the time she'd pulled back again and dropped the burr on the grass, he'd decided he was in love.

"Well." She twirled the parasol. "I'm afraid Adrian has to come inside now."

Adrian said, "But—"

"—No," she cut in firmly, without raising her voice. "You promised Master Ignatius that you'd finish that project. And a promise is a promise. Isn't that right, Mark?"

"Yes," Mark said. He realized that this wasn't a subject for negotiation. He climbed off the beautiful red and cream bicycle and wheeled it over to Adrian, who took it with the seriousness of a priest handling the sacrament. Without a word—children never understand the need for farewells—he followed his mother back towards the great house.

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When Adrian had leaned the bicycle against the wall and the French windows had flashed shut again, Mark turned and ran like the wind.

The day after was a school day; it should have been an ordinary day. But Mark's father woke him early, a letter clasped awkwardly in his hand.

"This came," he said. "Just now as I was out doing a bit of weeding out the front. A man in uniform . . . "

Mark sat up and took the letter from him. He knew his father's reading was uncertain at the best of times. The paper was creased and slightly grubby from his father's fingers, but was a rich cream with an embossed red crest and letter heading and smelt of books and leather and luxury.

"It's about me," Mark said as comprehension and surprise trickled over him. "It says I've got to leave here and go as an apprentice gardener in the King's estate at Maldon."

"Now . . . " A half-hopeful smile crinkled his father's stubbled face. "That's foolishness, son. What does it really say?"

Mark glanced down at the letter again, almost doubting his own words. "That's what it says. I've got to leave here and go."

The black limousine came out of the rain, rumbling and splashing along the cart tracks to the cottage, pursued by drenched and shouting children and watched by arms-folded clusters of incredulous neighbors sheltering in porches and under dripping trees. The liveried driver took Mark's small case and held open the rear door. Mark descended into deep pile and leather. He hardly had time to glance back through the window and the rain before the cottages and his father had gone from sight.

It took most of the day to reach Maldon. Mark had to ask the driver to stop many times—he discovered that he suffered from travel sickness—but at least being ill gave him an excuse for his tears. He hardly noticed the world through which they passed, a world he had never seen before; cut off in his sickness by the rain-beaded windows, none of it seemed real, least of all the great forest that surrounded Maldon. As evening set in, the limousine lost its purr and strained grumpily up and down hills and roads tunneled by boughs and huge greenery. Wet fingers of bush and fern trailed and whispered along the panels or pushed themselves against the windows like sudden, eerie faces.

Finally, a great gate in a huge wall opened ahead. When they were through it was as though the forest had never been. After swishing along gravel roads across smooth acres of lake and lawn, the limousine finally stopped.

Mark stumbled out. The driver gave him back his case. The rain had faded and the air was evening dim, scented with green. Across the pud-

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dled and mossy paving a great, ivy clad building hunched its red roofs against forest hills and grey sky. So this was Maldon. Mark was impressed, but also a little disappointed; the house was no larger than the Widder house, and certainly less ornate.

"Where does the king live?" he wondered aloud, glancing along the rows of windows.

The driver snorted. "The castle is miles away, not that the king's ever there. This is just the hostel for the apprentices, for little oiks like you."

Mark hated Maldon from the start. After the initiations in the trembling darkness of the dormitory, after the forced fights and the preliminary beatings by the hostel masters, life settled into a bleak routine.

No reigning monarch had visited Maldon for more than fifty years. It continued to function, but, like the rain clouds that gathered so frequently on the surrounding hills, a greyness permeated the estate. The lawns and hedges were trimmed, exotic fruits were tended for the royal table, harvested, then left to rot. The solitary yearly rose that blossomed on the Culpen bush which traditionally was presented to the king on Saint Errig's day in July opened its petals, and let them fall. The king and his court preferred the diversions of the capital or, if they wanted to risk a little fresh air, there were more southerly retreats where the sun could be relied on.

In his misery—misery so predictable that Mark ceased to be conscious of it as anything other than normality—he still found comfort in all things green, all things that grew.

He soon realized that he knew tricks from his father that the gardeners at Maldon had somehow forgotten, or never known. How apple suckers, sawfly, and earwigs could be collected from fruit trees simply by hanging an open matchbox at the end of the branch. How a scatter of rose petals would draw the fairies away from the cabbages and a circle of clinker would keep the common slug at bay.

His knowledge brought mixed rewards. To stand out in any way from the other apprentices guaranteed a greater number of fights and beatings, but at the same time the hostel masters and under gardeners weren't foolish enough to turn away from good advice. Of course, they usually snatched the credit for Mark's efforts, for an eelworm-free crop of onions or an ancient rose restored to health, but at heart they were lazy and found undue success almost as trying as failure. Gradually, Mark was allowed to rise.

When he was sixteen, he was made an under gardener and allocated a little room of his own away from the dormitory. The previous occupant had hung himself with green gardening twine looped around the coat hook on the back of the door, but no ghosts disturbed Mark. In the

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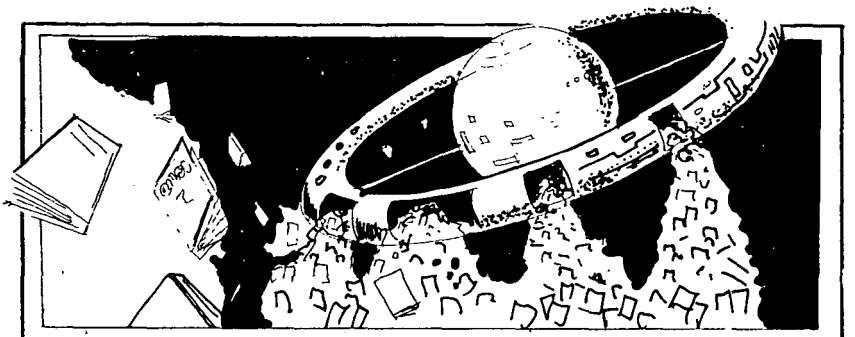

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evenings, he could sit by the open sash window where the ivy whispered and nodded and read books from the hostel's mildewed library, or simply gaze out at the green. The pines across the courtyard. The wild and misty hills in the distance.

He was appointed a full gardener at eighteen and a half. Although he was still the same solitary young man living in the same hostel room, Mark was grateful for the small privileges of rank and, in his own way, proud. Now that he had the freedom—and the money—he was able at last to take the charabanc out through the forest and the farmland far beyond to visit his father. He saw how the shapes of remembered trees on the Widder estate had changed; matured and broadened, or bowed into decrepitude. And past the gate and in the low walled garden in front of the kitchen window, he saw how lavender had choked the roses, how moss had darkened the patch of lawn. The man who greeted him, now stooped under a snowfall of white hair, trembled and avoided the eyes of his son. He was in awe of Mark; a gardener before the age of nineteen.

Mark lay sleepless that night in his childhood bedroom as he wondered at the change that had come between them. Was it fear, unfamiliarity, time? He got up from the narrow mattress and went to the window, pushing back the dusty cotton curtains. The moonlight was kind to the signs of neglect in the little garden below. The lawn looked smooth, the roses luxuriant. And then he saw a movement in the grey clouds of lavender beneath. A brownie gathering the fragrant buds. He smiled and watched until the creature finally flitted away into the orchard, then returned to bed and slept soundly through to morning.

Maldon was in turmoil when Mark arrived back, travelsick and tired. Inexplicably, the king had announced that he was going to revive his traditional visit to Maldon on Saint Errig's day, less than a week away.

One of the senior gardeners called Mark to the offices by the orangery next morning. He deposited his umbrella in the hatstand and rapped on the third brass-plated door along the corridor where panicking clerks scuttled. Mr. Parkin bade Mark sit down facing the wide desk. He looked worried; his face was more deeply marbled with veins than ever, the files in the IN tray leaned precariously and the smell of drink was strong.

Mark had expected the interview—there were bound to be duties to be devolved, preparations to be discussed—but as Mr. Parkin spoke Mark realized that he was being given a far greater responsibility than he would have bargained for, or wished. Biddle, one of the few genuinely experienced gardeners, had been found lying on the marble bench beside the Culpen bush by an estate doctor collecting lichen that dawn, his leather apron soaked with dew and the slugs already feasting at his mouth and eyes. With just a few days to go, Mark would have to take over.

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Afterward, Mark retrieved his umbrella and took the path between the willows around Blackroot Pool. It had already rained twice that morning, and between bursts of sunshine grey clouds were banking up once more over the hills. Every leaf, every blade of grass, was diamonded with moisture; to brush against a tree or bush guaranteed a soaking. But the estate was busy. Priveteers were clipping hedges, assistant gardeners were tying back peonies and laborers were mowing—mostly doing, Mark suspected, more harm than good in their panic. Of course, there *was* work to be done. Even in his anxiety about the Culpen bush and as the rain came down again, Mark still paused to snap the dead head off a rose and bent to pluck a shoot of bindweed from a flower bed, but his actions were gentle and instinctive. That was the way with a true gardener, not starting, not stopping, not hurrying, but understanding that the task never ends.

Mark had visited the far corner of the estate where the Culpen bush grew several times before. He'd been curious to see a plant that flowered so predictably, but he'd always misjudged the date and had never seen the bloom.

A long, wide avenue led to the garden of the Culpen bush. As Mark walked past the lines of elms through the thinning, drifting rain the dark Tudor arch at the far end slowly widened. The square little garden beyond that plain span of masonry was an obvious and possibly intentional anticlimax. Even with the sun breaking through after the rain it was dim and dull. Dense ivy climbed in the shadow of red brick walls, the highest of which, facing the Tudor arch, marked the final boundary of the estate. The oak forest beyond added to the shade, leaning over across the garden and whispering like an aunt admiring a baby. In the center, rising from a soggy square of grass, the Culpen bush spread its dark leaves.

Mark frowned as he looked around; it was a poor, lightless place, and the overhanging boughs of the forest would bring pests, insects, fungi, diseases, and fairies. The Culpen bush was fighting the odds to grow here at all. He walked around it. The outer leaves formed a ragged globe that almost matched his own height. A nerve of worry started to ache behind his eyes as he walked around it again, looking more carefully. There was no sign of a rose bud. And Mark knew where to look, *how* to look, what to expect. He wandered around the bush again and again, almost growing dizzy. But there was nothing. No sign. No rose.

He sat down on the wet marble bench facing the bush, then remembered Biddle and quickly stood up again. Had a rose ever blossomed on Saint Errig's day? Had anyone ever seen it? After all, more than fifty years had elapsed since it had been cut, placed on a velvet cushion and paraded before the king; a long time even—or especially—in a garden.

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He knew it was pointless telling anyone. Whatever the facts of the case were, the blame would surely settle on him. He walked forward and touched the wet, dark leaves of the bush. And as he did so, he saw a graceful tiara spider at work, spinning a web that gleamed silver between the thorny stalks even in this shadowed place. He smiled despite himself. Perhaps the bush was truly special, perhaps a little magic flowed in its sap. All he could do was tend it, and pray.

Mark worked on the Culpen bush all day, bowed in its shadows. Using his bare hands, he softened and sifted the soil around the base of the plant, chasing the leatherback beetles away, bringing worms from nearby portions of the estate to burrow in some air. The rain came and went. He tried propping up the umbrella, but soon gave up and let the drops patter his head and back and the mud soak in at his knees. Eventually, it grew too dark to see clearly. He stood up, cloaked in the scent of earth, rubbing at the familiar gardener's ache in his back. The bush was a dim cloud now, the leaves no longer separable by sight. In jokey pretense that it had been a fine, uninterrupted day, the sky was deep and pinkish blue. Peering through the powdery air at the overhanging forest, Mark thought he could just make out the darting movements of the spinner fairies as they wove strands of dusk from bough to bough.

Mark wiped the worst of the mud from his hands on the grass, picked up his umbrella and set off back toward the hostel. The birds were silent. The stately avenue was eerily balanced between day and night, enfolded in glowing shadow.

He heard the rattle of a bell. The sound was odd in the close softness of the evening, yet instantly familiar. Up ahead amid the fading perspectives of the elms, he saw a figure on a bicycle. Curious, yet too tired to run, he increased his step, but when he reached the place there were only tracks shining on the wet grass like a snail's glitter.

Early next day, after a restless night and a dream of chasing something bright through a forest, Mark was back tending the Culpen bush. He worked fine ash into the soil with his fingers, then began the painstaking task of pinching the greenfly from the leaves and stems one by one. He was soon lost in the task, oblivious to the gusting wind that shivered the elms along the avenue and the leaning oaks, yet then, half buried in the bush, his face and arms scratched and bleeding from the thorns and his hands sticky with the sap-like juice of the greenfly, his concentration was suddenly broken by a sense of being watched.

He twisted out from under the bush. A barefoot child was standing close by, dressed in grubby brown. An equally brown and grubby bicycle was propped up against the ivy at the edge of the garden.

"Hello," she said.

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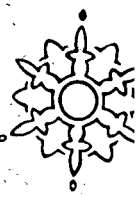

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Mark grunted discouragingly. He didn't enjoy being watched when he was working.

"You've been spending a lot of time inside that bush."

"It's the Culpen bush."

"Oh," She nodded. "Then it must be s'posed to flower soon."

Mark picked a thorn from his palm. "Four days from now, in fact. Not that there's any sign." He couldn't think of a reason not to tell her—just some grubby urchin, some laborer's child wandering the estate without permission.

"The flower's for the king?" she asked.

He stood up. "That's right."

The wind lifted wisps of light brown hair across her face. Mark was surprised at how tall she was, almost his own height. She was older than he'd thought, too. But then he was no expert, living a semi-monastic life at the hostel.

Mark shrugged and glanced back at the bush, feeling stupidly conscious that her eyes were on him. "I suppose I'll just have to hope . . ."

"That a bud suddenly appears?" She laughed. A little girl's laugh; fierce, absorbed, uncaring. The Culpen bush shivered in a sudden gust. "Well," she sniffed, "that would be magic, or a miracle."

Mark shrugged again as she turned away from him; so much, he thought, for sharing your problems.

She climbed back onto her bicycle, rang the bell and pedaled out of sight along the sighing avenue.

Dealing with the greenfly and tidying up the bush took him all of the rest of the day and the following morning, by which time the laborers were working their ladders along the avenue, trimming and cutting the elms—badly. Mark couldn't help noticing, and out of season—to make them look neat and soldierly for the king's procession to the Culpen bush. The shadowy little garden itself seemed to attract no attention; the laborers probably didn't know or care why the king was coming and the more senior staff in the estate would be too wrapped up in their own obsessions to think of anything as obvious as the absence of the Culpen rose. After he'd eaten his sandwiches sitting on the marble bench, Mark trimmed the ivy and the lawn with the shears he'd brought along. That was fairly easily done; the garden was too damp and shady to encourage quick growth.

Then he sat down again and stared at the Culpen bush. He tried thinking positively, he tried willing a flower to grow. Along the avenue, the rip of saws and falling, splintering timber grew closer, then receded. Once, he felt someone's presence behind him and turned, irritated, expecting to see the girl. There was no one there. He gauged it as an

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indication of the unhappy mood that the irritation then turned to disappointment.

Back at the hostel that evening, Mr. Parkin came to the refectory as Mark sat alone drinking tea.

"Dress rehearsal the day after tomorrow," he said, leaning over Mark and swaying a little. "Will everything be ready then?"

"Everything?"

"The rose."

"Yes." Mark nodded.

"Good." Mr. Parkin backed away, bumping painfully into the edge of a table.

It was foggy next morning. The elms along the avenue loomed. Mark felt sleepy and light-headed; he couldn't see beyond the next few days of his life. The dress rehearsal, the formal procession . . . Giants in the mist, barring his way.

The tiara spider had silvered the entire culpen bush with its web. Mark sat down on the marble bench. Fog wreathed the boughs of the forest, hung from the ivy like rotting lace, closed off the sky.

A bell. The sound glittering in the thick air like a jewel, then closer, and with it the swish of bicycle tires on the soft grass. Mark waited expectantly.

"Hello." She dismounted, then came fully from the mist and sat beside him. "Any luck?"

She had changed from the grubby brown dress and looked considerably more presentable in a green blouse and skirt.

Mark shook his head.

"Never mind." She smiled, laid a hand on his shoulder.

Embarrassingly, Mark felt himself shiver. "It's too late to do anything," he said.

"Then forget about it. Why worry?"

Her eyes were green, brown, blue. Colors of autumn and summer, sadness and life. She was hardly a girl at all. A woman, yes. A woman. But even as Mark decided, the play of misty light changed her face and all he saw was a child.

She gave him an odd look, almost as though she'd been caught out.

"My name's Mark," he said.

"Mine's Fianna."

"Fiona?"

"No, Fianna." She spelt it out to him.

Mark nodded. He didn't want to hurt her feelings by commenting on her parents' obvious illiteracy—after all, his own father was hardly better.

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She squirmed on the bench. "This is cold, cold and wet. You'll give yourself piles."

Mark said nothing. Even in the hostel he'd lived a sheltered life; he wasn't sure what piles were.

"Can you ride a bicycle?"

"I think so," he said. "I could once."

"Then why don't you try mine. It'll take your mind off the rose. I'll just sit here and get piles and watch."

The bicycle rested against the ivied wall. As Mark placed his hands on the old handlebars he was filled with doubt. After all these years, could he still make it balance and fly? He wheeled it out, finding the seat, the pedals, pushing off. The bicycle responded, became alive, drawing him into the mist.

He circled the walled garden, turning sharply around the rose bush, past Fianna on the bench. She clapped and cheered. Mark circled again, the quick mist opening and closing ahead and behind.

Dizzy, breathing hard, he finally braked and placed his feet on the soft, solid grass.

She ran over to him and placed a steadying hand upon his arm as he dismounted. "Well done!"

Mark no longer shivered at her touch, but Fianna's closeness brought an extraordinary feeling of softness, yearning. He blinked and found himself looking into her wide, beautiful eyes. The mist was thinning, forming a glowing nimbus around her hair.

She pulled back a little, releasing his arm.

"Thank you," Mark said ". . . for letting me try the bicycle."

"That's all right. I'd better go soon."

The wonderful feeling slackened as she drew away, like a wave hissing back across the shore, but when he passed the handlebars to her and their skin touched it came crashing in again.

"What are you going to do today?" she asked, backing off, her eyes lowered as she fiddled with the rusty chrome casing of the bell.

"I don't know," he said. "There's nothing left to do. I haven't touched the bush, or hardly looked at it."

"Then how can you be so sure a flower hasn't budded?" She turned the front wheel and climbed on the bicycle. "You can't be, can you?"

"No . . ."

"Good luck." She cycled off.

Mark walked slowly around the spider-webbed bush. The sky overhead was almost blue now. Something about the clearing mist made this normally shady place fill with brightness. The dewy, sparkling bush looked wonderful, Mark had to concede. It hardly needed a rose to decorate itself with. He watched the architect, the tiara spider with its jewel-like cluster

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of eyes, still embroidering leaf and branch. It paused, as though conscious of Mark's gaze, then moved gracefully on along a green stem to weave its silk around a fresh new rose bud.

Rising from a crag at the center of the estate, the ornate grey battlements of Maldon Castle hemmed the sky. On the day of the dress rehearsal, a red carpet slid like a tongue from the porticullis mouth, down the rhododendron screes of the crag and across the gardens, all the way to the culpen bush.

The mock procession, the king's new equerry standing in for the king himself, left Maldon Castle at ten in the morning. The Head Master Gardener, the master gardeners, the chief horticulturists and others ranking high in the garden pyramid assumed, to their chagrin, third place in the procession behind the blue and silver ceremonial band that led the way through the pleasant sunshine and the courtiers in their tripping robes and feathered hats. The procession started off slowly and, striving for dignity, grew slower.

Mark stood waiting in the culpen garden with a scatter of senior gardeners and minor officials. It was well after noon before he heard the first faint echo of the band as they turned into the top of the avenue. The sawn, clipped elms stood rigidly to attention.

The sound grew closer.

"Here they come," Mr. Parkin slurred, gripping a nearby shoulder for support. "Ready now."

Half an hour later, the mock procession arrived. The band stood fanfare along the sides of the avenue. The king's young equerry led the gaudy pack.

"So this is it," he said as they finally passed under the Tudor arch. "This place, this bush. Is *this* really what all the fuss is about?"

Silks and shufflings filled the garden. Beautiful patterns and colors. Tired faces, ugly with worry and responsibility. The Head Master Gardener made a rapid flanking movement to get beside the equerry.

"Tradition, my lord."

"Of course, tradition. Where would we be, eh?"

Peering around the surrounding heads, Mark saw that the equerry was indeed young. Little more than his own age. And oddly, frustratingly, he recognized him from somewhere.

"Then what happens next?"

"That's all . . . um . . ." The Head Master Gardener opened and closed his mouth like a fish.

"I grow bored," the equerry snapped. "Please let me have your views, sir. I'm hardly likely to know what goes on here, and neither's the bloody king."

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"Well, the rose is placed on the very same cushion that . . . oh, here it is."

"I see. And where is the rose?"

"Ah. Let me . . . here. Yes. This."

"And who cuts it?"

The Head Master Gardener looked around, pleading for assistance. None was forthcoming. "Well . . . I . . ."

"How about someone from the estate?" the equerry suggested, his face puckered with irritation. "Some chappie who, oh, I don't know . . . How about the fellow who looks after the rose?"

"Of course, my lord."

The Head Master Gardener looked to the master gardeners, who looked to the senior gardeners.

"Step forward," Mr. Parkin lisped. "Go on."

Mark pushed his way awkwardly to the front of the crowd. "I tend the rose," he announced as feathers bobbed and heads turned towards him.

The equerry regarded him sullenly. "You're rather young, my friend. You really don't look the part. Still, we waste time and this is becoming boring. You'll have to do. What next?" He clapped his hands. His silk sleeves fluttered. "What next?"

The Head Master Gardener produced a pair of secateurs from the front of his embossed ceremonial apron. Mark took the cold metal in his hands and walked around the bush to the glorious, unfolding bloom. He felt let down, angry. Surely it wouldn't be like this tomorrow? Just some foolish ceremony?

"Then let us assume," the equerry said, "that the rose has been cut. It is placed on the cushion just so and our friend here brings it to the king. That's right, just *try* to pretend that I'm the king."

Mark took the old and rather threadbare cushion and walked towards the equerry. The bland face was maddeningly familiar. Across his nose and cheeks, Mark saw the faint stain of childhood freckles, and as he did so he remembered the wide lawn, the red and cream bicycle.

"You're Adrian Widder . . my lord."

The equerry scowled. "I don't see what right you have to know or speak my name."

"But you taught me to ride your bicycle. That day, your father's birthday . . ."

Briefly, Mark believed he saw a glimmer of recognition, but then it vanished under irritation and disdain.

"You play a trick like that tomorrow before the king," the equerry hissed, his face growing pale and the old freckle marks showing more strongly, "and I swear you'll never dig a single turd of manure in any garden in the kingdom. Anyway . . ." he turned his back on Mark

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"... I think we've done enough. At this point, having accepted the rose—which he will pass back to me and I will toss behind a convenient bush—our beloved king will commence his progress back to the castle."

"Here," the Head Master Gardener said as they left, giving Mark back the silver secateurs. "You might as well keep these for tomorrow."

The crowd departed down the avenue, slowly fading from sight and hearing, leaving Mark standing alone in the walled garden. He pushed the secateurs into his apron pouch and sat down on the marble bench.

It was midafternoon. The birds were quiet. Hazy sunshine gilded the tops of the forest trees. He gazed at the Culpen bush, at the rose, its petals almost fully open from the bud in just one day. It was a miracle, no rose grew and unfurled that quickly. And all for what? He clenched and unclenched his fists, wondering if he was still capable of tears.

He'd never seen a rose of its like, or equal. Despite its size and the dense, heavy mass of its petals, it lifted proudly from its stem, seeking the sun that never graced the walled garden. Even sitting a good couple of yards away from it, Mark was bathed in the scent. It was unlike any other rose, bringing memories of wide lawns and clear skies, of a beautifully lady with a white parasol leaning close him in sunlight. And it was partly that, Mark realized, that had triggered his memory of Adrian Widder. He shook his head. That was all in the past. Nothing remained, absolutely nothing.

The petals of the Culpen rose were white, but in the shade of their unfurling and in the deep and unrevealed heart was a blackness that went beyond shade or shadow or night. He breathed the fragrance again. It was too sweet and too bitter to ignore.

He heard the tinkle of a bicycle bell, the tick of approaching wheels. Fianna scooted in on one pedal and alighted smoothly, graceful as a swan, leaning the bicycle beside the Tudor arch.

"I've been watching the procession," she said. "I shouldn't really be on this bike. See, with my best clothes on."

She was barefoot as usual, but in a simple white dress. As she crossed the garden her image flickered dizzily in Mark's mind. Child, girl, woman, child . . .

"Has the rose come?" she asked.

"Yes." Mark's voice quavered. "It's here."

"Then let me see. And why do you look so glum?"

Mark crouched down beside the bloom. She leaned close behind him, but somehow from a vast, impossible height. Her scent, the scent of the rose, roared in his senses. The light and the darkness played over her young, old face, in the depths of her eyes.

She looked toward him. "You should be proud."

Mark swallowed, fighting for words through the dryness of his throat.

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She was Lady Widder, his dreams, his mother. "I am . . . I just can't let those people take it."

Mark stood up. His knees were trembling. She reached forward and pressed his hands into hers. Mark could feel the power passing between them in a delicious, aching rush. The shadowed garden waited, hushed in expectancy.

She took a step closer.

She kissed him.

When she drew back, letting go, she smiled at the seriousness of it all.

"It doesn't matter really, does it?" Mark said, dizzy with the sense of her reality. "The king, this bush?"

Gently, she shook her head.

"Look," Mark took the silver secateurs from his apron and gently clasped the culpen rose between its thorns. The tiara spider scuttled out of his way along the broken web.

"I shouldn't—" she began.

But his mind was made up; he didn't hear the fear and urgency in her voice. He closed the jaws of the secateurs and lifted the incredible weight of the rose towards her.

The petals curled, writhing outwards, black spilling over white like ink through milk. The blackness turned to ash as the culpen bush shivered in a sudden wind that caught the flaking remains, swirling them up into the arms of the forest.

Mark looked up at Fianna. The darkness was spreading, filling the white of her eyes, blistering and crinkling her dress and her skin. The wind increased, a tunnel billowing into the sky, swirling her hair like smoke. As she began to dissolve, flying upwards in ragged ash, the remains of her mouth opened into a scream, a sound neither of pain nor joy. Then she was swallowed in the shrieking wind, twirling into shadow, into nothing.

The wind quickly died. Mark stood alone by the flowerless bush. The still, damp shade settled in a cloak of sadness. There are many pests in a garden. Thrips. Manslugs. Greenfly. Fairies. Yes, that he had always known.

The old bicycle still rested beside the Tudor arch. He untangled the handlebars from the ivy and wheeled it over to the far wall, the forest wall. He leaned it there, settling it carefully before climbing onto the saddle and then, clasping the strongest stems, on up through the ivy towards the waiting boughs. ●

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DISTANT ENCOUNTERS

Together on the road through the graveyard.
Walking late at night when the moon slivers
flicker through the skeletal branches,
and a plaster of snow glows from
the backs of headstones,
a residue of ghosts.
We talk in low voices
of finality, of my mother's passing.
We stop and look to where the town
shimmers yellow in the distance.
The darkness around us remains absolute—
cloud patches against a black cloth.
We stand for a measureless moment,
then sudden light swells under our feet.
We turn, I point to a low shape
with spots flooding the hillside around us.
"They've come to take us," Karol says.
I sigh and say, "We've waited so long."

But it's just a two-engine prop flying overhead,
leaving us to wonder why we wonder
so much about love and death and
the possibilities of other worlds.
The snow begins to drift down,
melting in our breath
but covering the ground
with a thin shroud
of silence.

—Robert Frazier

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The author has lived in New York, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Texas, Paraguay, and Brazil, and she now resides in the San Francisco Bay area.Her short fiction has been published in *F&SF*, *Full Spectrum II*, *The Further Adventures of Batman*, and other anthologies. "3 RMS, Good View" is her first tale for *IAsfm*.

by Karen Haber

3 RMS, GOOD VIEW

art: John Johnson

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"Apartment for rent," the faxxad said. "3 rms, gd view, Potrero Hill area. $1200 a month, Utilities pd."

I stared at it in disbelief. It sounded like a dream. Most apartments in the city had waiting lists for their sublease waiting lists.

"Southern exp. Pets OK."

Better and better. Then I found the catch. The apartment was available, all right: in 1968.

I almost didn't take it.

Don't misunderstand me. I've always wanted to live in San Francisco. Kind of felt like it was my home town—the one I'd always been meant to live in, instead of the sprawling metroplex of Greater Los Angeles. I first came north in 1997 on a family expedition to the Pan Pacific Exposition. I was thirteen. The fair was fun, but what I loved was San Francisco: the sun-swept hillsides, the streets lined with flower boxes, the ding-a-ling of the street cars floating in the cool air, the fog creeping in at dusk—it was heaven. And I knew I would come back. It took me seventeen years and a divorce, but I did it. Right after I graduated from Boult and passed the bar.

Unfortunately, housing was tight—more than tight. The city had instituted severe building restrictions back in 2003 and got what it asked for: all residential construction not only halted but vanished, gone eastward to the greener pastures of Contra Costa County.

I got on the waiting list of every real estate agent in the Bay Area, but the best digs I could find was a studio apartment—more like a large walk-in closet with stucco walls—in a renovated duplex in Yuba City. Add on a three-hour commute to my job in San Francisco's financial district, and we're not exactly talking about positive quality of life.

So when I saw the ad, I jumped. And stopped in mid-air. I'm not one of those sentimental people who long to travel back in history. I like realtime, always have. It's a peculiar trait, considering my family.

My grandmother lives in 1962, and has for the last ten years. She said it was the last time that America was great—and convinced of it. "Loosen up, Christine," she said to me before she left. "You should be more flexible. There's nothing wrong with the past."

My brother lives in 1990, has shaved his head, and dyed it in concentric circles of red and black. Every now and then I get a note from him through e-mail: "Come visit. We'll hit the after-hours clubs. Don't you ever take a vacation?"

Mom likes 1984 but she always had an odd sense of humor. I haven't heard from her in five years.

Pardon me if I like realtime best. I've always had my feet planted firmly in the present. Practical, sturdy Christine. In the lofty hierarchy of Mount Olympus, I'd be placed just to the left of Zeus in the marble

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frieze. In the Athena position, that is. Yes, I even have the grey eyes and brown hair to go with the no-nonsense attitude. I'm tall and muscular, as befits your basic warrior-goddess/business-attorney type. My stature is useful, too. Who wants an attorney who doesn't look efficient and imposing?

And I've never wanted to go backward. I remember the first reports of problems and glitches associated with time travel. Sheila, one of my prelaw classmates at Berkeley, wanted to spend her Christmas break in the village where her French great-great-grandmother lived. But a power surge from Sacramento sent her to the fourteenth century instead. Talk about your bad neighborhoods. If she hadn't gotten her shots before she left—complaining all the way—she'd probably have come back sporting buboes the size of nectarines.

After Sheila's brush with the Black Death, I told myself I was immune to the allure of era-hopping. I ignored the faxxads for Grand Tours: the Crucifixion and sack of Rome package, $1598. Dark Ages through the Enlightenment, two weeks for $2100, all meals and tips included. (These packages are especially popular with the Japanese, who have become time-travel junkies. And why not? They can go away and come back without losing any realtime at work.) Even when the Koreans made portable transport units for home or office, I shrugged and stuck by realtime. But when I saw the listing in the paper, I looked around the stucco walls of my apartment/cell and threw all my sturdy, practical notions to the wind. An apartment on Potrero Hill? Sure: Pallas Athena transmuted into impulsive, inquisitive Mercury.

Hands trembling with excitement and impatience, I faxxed my credit history to Jerry Raskin, the real estate agent listed, and received an appointment to view the place.

We met at Raskin's office in the Tenderloin. He was a short man, barely reaching my shoulder, with thinning dark hair and a doughy nose that looked like a biscuit. A matte-black enameled time transport unit sat behind his desk.

I stared at it uneasily.

"Want to look over the premises?" he asked. He gestured toward the unit.

"Uh, yes. Of course." I took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold of the transport.

There was a sudden fragmentation of color, of sound. I was in a high white space, falling. I was stepping into an apartment on Potrero Hill, shaking my head in wonder.

Even before the shimmering transport effect had diminished, he'd launched into his sales pitch.

"It's a gem," Jerry said proudly. "I hardly ever get this kind of listing."

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He flicked an invisible piece of lint from the shoulder of his blue tweed suit. "Once every five years."

It *was* perfect. Big sunny rooms paneled in pine, full of light, ready for plants. Hardwood floors. There was even a little balcony off the bedroom where I could watch the fog drift in over Twin Peaks in the summer afternoons.

All wound up, oblivious to my rapture, Jerry rattled on. "You can install a transport unit in the closet for your morning and evening commute to realtime. It's a steal. What's your rail commute now from Yuba City?"

I didn't need much convincing. "I'll take it."

"Two year lease," he said. "Sign here." Then he brandished a yellow contract. "This too."

"What is it?" I was Pallas Athena again, staring down suspiciously from my lofty legal height onto the sweaty center of his bald spot. "If this is a pet restriction clause, I'm going to protest. Your ad didn't say anything about this. I've got a cat." I kept MacHeath at work—there was more room there than at home. But where I went, he went.

"Sure, sure," he said. "You can keep your kitty as long as you pay a deposit. This is just your standard non-interference contract."

"Non-interference contract?"

He looked at me like I was stupid. It rarely happens, but when someone does that, I really don't like it.

"You know," he said, and recited in a sing-song voice: "don't change the past or the past will change you. The time laws. You lawyers understand this kind of thing." He pointed a thick finger at my chin. "You, and you alone, are responsible for any dislocation of past events, persons, or things, etcetera, etcetera. Read the small print and sign."

A sudden chill teased my upper vertebrae. Non-interference? Well, why would I interfere with the past? The morning sunlight streamed in through the big window in the front room. High clouds scudded over the hillside. I shook off the shivers and signed.

A week later, I took up residence, hanging my tiny collection of photos, putting down rugs, and glorying in my privacy. MacHeath didn't care for the transport effect, but he approved of his new home, and after sniffing every corner of it, spent most of his days following the sunlight from window to window, the better to admire his orange stripes before snoozing.

Life's pendulum swung between work and home, uptime and downtime, in an easy arc. Thanks to the transport, I could leave the house at any time of day and return a moment later. This made for a great deal of quality time spent snuggled with MacHeath on the red corduroy sofa. And on my own, in the heart of a smaller, cozier city where I wandered

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gratefully along the waterfront, bought sourdough bread and lingered over coffee in North Beach jazz clubs. And everywhere there was color and life and music: garish psychedelic posters printed in what I think were called day-glo colors announcing musical groups with odd names like The Jackson's Airplane. Shaggy-haired, brightly dressed, friendly people lived in casual groups on the street, in buses, and in the old houses lining Haight Street and Ashbury. I fell in love with the past—at least, with San Francisco's past.

At work, they asked me how I could stand to watch history go by without comment.

"Don't you ever want to warn somebody?" Bill Hawthorne, the senior partner, said. "Don't you ever want to call up Martin Luther King or Bobby Kennedy and warn him? Say 'stay off of hotel room balconies' or 'don't go in the kitchen'?"

"Shame on you, Bill," I said. I smiled. "You know that's against the law."

In fact, I watched, agog, as the alarming parade of assassinations and demonstrations took place. History on the hoof. I began to see why people get hooked on the past. It's like participatory video.

And during the year I lived in 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, and Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles. And somebody moved into the downstairs apartment.

It had remained empty for so long that I'd begun to think of it as part of my domain. Oh, I'd assumed an uptime renter would appear one morning, strangely dressed, keeping to him-or-herself. I'd seen one or two folks in the neighborhood I suspected of being residential refugees from uptime, but I'd avoided them, and if they'd noticed me at all, they'd carefully ducked me. We all played the game with discretion.

I was out of town, uptime, when the people downstairs moved in. The first sign I had of their presence was the primal beat of rock music reverberating through my lovingly stained floorboards, occasionally punctuated by the high manic whine of amplified electric guitars. Boom-boom-bah. Boom-boom-bah. For five hours I considered various legal strategies showing just cause for murder: sorry, your honor, but it was self defense. Their music made me psychotic and if I hadn't stopped it, the entire neighborhood would have been at risk and all history would have been changed so I had to do it, don't you see? About three in the morning, somebody turned off the music.

The next day, as I was blearily putting out my garbage, I met my downstairs neighbor. He was sitting in the backyard, smoking a sweet-smelling cigarette. The pungent smoke curled up above his head in lazy circles. Long wavy blond hair fell to the middle of his back. He was

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wearing jeans and a brown suede vest, but aside from that his interest in clothing seemed minimal. His toenails were black with grime.

"Name's Duffy," he said. He jerked his head at a hefty woman in a long muslin skirt and peasant blouse who stood in the doorway, smiling spacily at me. Her strawberry-blonde hair was gathered into two fat braids that fell past her knees. She was wearing metal-rimmed glasses whose lenses caught the light and flashed prismatic reflections on the grass. I stared, fascinated. I'd forgotten that in this era people used external devices to correct their vision.

"This is my old lady, Seashell."

The head jerked again, this time toward an urchin with a dirty face, stringy blonde hair, and big blue eyes. "This is our little girl, Peacelove."

Peacelove wiped her nose against the back of her hand and stared at me. All three of them stared at me, at my burr haircut, severe business suit, dark shoes, glossy pigskin briefcase. I realized that to my new hippie neighbors I must have looked like some kind of strange male impersonator.

"Hi," I said. "Nice to meet you." I climbed the stairs.

"Far out," Duffy said, staring at my briefcase. "You some kind of secretary or actress or something?"

"Something," I said, and as I smiled, I closed my door.

Weekends, I took long walks through Golden Gate Park. It was green, beautiful, and filled with people who could have been Duffy's close relatives.

"Peace," they said, and I nodded.

"Love."

I smiled.

"Could you lay a little bread on me, please?"

I shook my head and walked away, confused—why did they think I'd just come from a bakery?

For trips to the grocery store, I bought a lime-green Volkswagen with a dented purple fender, third-hand, and after some abrupt, bucking rides down the block, mastered the quaint antique stick shift and clutch.

As for clothing, well, I found used jeans in the neighborhood Army-Navy store and a loose-fitting top of muslin tie-died in pink and red. The shirt itched a bit when I wore it and turned my underwear grey-pink when I washed it, but it was good camouflage. I tied a red bandana around my head to cover my short hair and tried to be inconspicuous. I almost succeeded.

I learned my neighbors' schedule quickly. They stayed up all night, vibrating my apartment, and slept all day. Apparently, the little girl didn't go to school. Once, I glanced out my window to see her staring up hungrily at my place. I tried not to see her. I really tried.

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One night, late, as the guitars whined and I was about to switch on my sound dampers, there was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Duffy."

I opened the door a crack. "What's up?"

He peered at me from bloodshot eyes whose lids were at half mast. "Thought you might want to come to a party," he said, and smiled muzzily.

"No thanks," I said. "I need my sleep."

"C'mon, don't be a hard lady," he said. "Seashell's gone to see her folks. Just you 'n me."

I almost laughed. Men rarely looked at me the way he was looking at me now. While I might have welcomed it from one or two of the attorneys I knew in realtime, I was certainly not interested in *Duffy*.

"That's too small a party for me. No thanks."

"Hey, Seashell won't mind. Whatever goes down is cool with her."

"Congratulations. Hope you know a good lawyer when things warm up." I shut the door.

The apartment was blissfully quiet after that—in fact, I didn't hear any of Duffy's music for at least a week. Didn't see him or Seashell. Once, when I was putting out the garbage, Peacelove appeared at the front window, pressed her little hands against the pane, and stared out at me. I smiled. She didn't smile back. When she turned to walk away, I saw that her hands had left dirty smudges on the glass.

I spent a week in realtime on an important case, and when I got back discovered I had new neighbors.

Duffy and his family were gone. In their place were two skinny guys in their twenties with long dark hair, beards, and the same interest in the same kind of music. They barely acknowledged my presence, which was fine.

One night, I heard a child crying, late, after the music had ended, when the noise dampers had cycled and shut down. It was the high, keening, hopeless sound of one who doesn't expect to be comforted. It was the kind of sound no child should ever have to make.

I got out of bed, listened, heard it again, opened the front door. Then I couldn't hear it any more. The night was silent save for the creaking floorboards under my feet. Was I imagining things? MacHeath yawned elaborately as I got back into bed and made his sleepy, inquisitive quenching sound.

"It's nothing," I said. "Bad dream."

The next night I heard it again—the sound of a child crying hopelessly, long after everybody else in the world was asleep.

Two days later, I saw her.

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She was standing in the backyard, weaving back and forth. Her eyes were half-closed as though she were stoned.

I took a step toward her. "Honey, are you all right?"

She opened her eyes. The pupils were massive, almost engulfing the blue irises.

"Peacelove, where's your mommy?"

"Mommy?" She looked at me, her face crumpled into tears, and she ran into the house.

I didn't hear the crying again after that.

But I did meet one of Peacelove's babysitters. He was waiting outside one morning as I brought out the garbage.

"Hey, sister."

I ignored him, thinking about torts, about deed restrictions. About Peacelove.

Suddenly, there was a hand on my shoulder. "Hey. You deaf?" Another hand attached itself to my ass.

I leaned toward him, feinted, grabbed his arm and pulled him past me, shoving him headfirst into the metal garbage can. He landed with a crash. For a moment, I thought I'd killed him. Then he groaned and rolled over onto his side. He lay there, stunned, peering up at me.

"Hands off," I said, enunciating carefully, showing my strong white teeth. "I don't know you. I don't want to." I kicked the can beside his head to emphasize the point. He winced and nodded.

After that, he left me alone. But I came home one night to find that the door to my apartment had been vandalized: somebody had tried to force the lock. Good thing I'd brought a security sealer from uptime and installed it. Whoever had attempted the deed had contented themselves with carving the word "bitch" into the wood just above the doorknob.

Damn straight, I thought. And don't you forget it.

I left the graffito exactly where it was.

The crying at night resumed. I began to wonder if I should call somebody. But who? Where were Duffy and Seashell? Were they really even her parents? And what kind of child welfare agencies were available in the 1960s? Could Peacelove hope for anything better than what she had right now? And the time laws were explicit. No interference.

I didn't know what to do, so I waited. And she who hesitates, kills.

I transported home one night into a smoke-filled apartment. It was eleven P.M. I felt the floor—hot, too hot. I called the fire department, grabbed MacHeath, and was halfway out the door before I remembered the transport unit. Cursing, I disconnected it, threw it into my briefcase and ran down the stairs, arms full of squirming orange cat.

By the time I got to the pavement, the lower apartment was completely engulfed, the flames roaring like an insane animal. The upper story

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caught and I watched the flames dance up the curtains and past my front window. Imagined them licking and consuming my rugs, quilts, clothing. My life. I could hear the screams of sirens as firetrucks raced down the street.

Lights came on in houses up and down the block and sleepy faces peered through windows, through open doors. Tears were running down my cheeks, matting MacHeath's fur. He struggled furiously, trying to get away from the strange sounds, the dark, the people. Finally, I stowed him in my car.

Red-coated firemen kicked in the door downstairs. The thick rubber hose they carried spewed gallons of water into the inferno. The roaring faltered, subsided, diminished into an ugly hissing. In half an hour, the remains of the house were smoldering, smoking, but the fire was dead.

Shivering, I watched as the bodies were carried out: some charred and blackened beyond recognition as once-living things. Nine bodies—had there really been that many people living there? And one more, smaller than the rest. The last to be brought out.

Peacelove.

"Found her by the back window," the fireman said. His voice was hoarse from smoke and emotion. "I think she was trying to open it and get out. But the damned thing was painted shut." Gently, he set down the tiny corpse. "Jesus. I've got two at home around her age."

I turned around, walked away, spent the night at a neighbor's house. The next morning, I waited until the good samaritan had left for work at the shipyards, then plugged in the transport, set it for auto-retrieve, and took MacHeath back to realtime, right into Jerry Raskin's office.

"You son of a bitch!" I grabbed him by the lapel of his checkered coat. "You knew that place was going to burn down when you rented it to me."

"What? I swear I didn't!" He stared fearfully at my soot-stained face. "I had no idea. You've got to believe me."

I shook him until his teeth chattered. "You are required by law to do a time sweep to alert tenants to potential dangers!"

"I did. I did. The records came up clean—the former owner must have lied to the insurance company." His eyes were huge with terror now. I put him down and he backed away from me until the desk separated us. "Besides, you look okay to me. You got out all right, didn't you? I'll refund your deposit. What are you complaining about?"

I decided not to make trouble for him. I went back to Yuba City. Found a studio apartment that almost had room for me and MacHeath. Tried to forget.

By day, it was easy. The Golden Gate Bridge glistened in the sunlight. The bay was dotted by solar-powered sailboats. The cable cars went ding-

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a-ling. The scent of coffee and chocolate wafted up from Ghiradelli Square. Work was blessedly absorbing, as always.

At night, my dreams were filled with little girls with dirty faces and huge blue eyes, terrified little girls with their hands and faces pressed against a wall of unyielding glass as flames raced up behind them.

"Help," they cried, in my dreams. "Help. Mommy. Daddy. Christine."

I took it for two weeks.

On my way to work one morning, I glanced through the window as we pulled into Powell Station. Another train had come in on the parallel track, and in it a small girl with big blue eyes stared at me with great seriousness. Her hands were pressed against the window. I looked down at my faxxpaper. When I looked up again, she was gone. But two small handprints smudged the glass where she had been.

That night I went back.

I went back to 1968 and stood outside the house and watched as the fire gained strength. Watched, paralyzed, as the smoke billowed upward. Saw a woman—me—peer out the upstairs window with fierce, frightened eyes as she held an orange cat in her arms.

Was that tough, severe-looking woman me? Was that who I wanted to be?

Then I saw a flash at the downstairs window. A small face, eyes huge. Peacelove, struggling with the latch. The smoke filled the room behind her. She beat against the window, coughing.

I moved, then. Picked up a rock.

The fire engine sirens howled in the distance.

I saw myself coming down the stairs and darted to the side, out of sight, quickly, quickly, until I knew that I was putting MacHeath in the car with my back to the house.

Awkwardly, then, I smashed in the window. Reached through jagged glass that scratched hands and arms, grabbed the child and pulled her through. The flames chased her right up to the edge of the sill, but they couldn't have her. No. Not this time.

Peacelove clung to me, crying. I rocked her gently.

"It's okay, honey." And smeared blood and soot on her face. I didn't care. She was alive.

When she'd calmed enough to fall into an exhausted sleep, I handed her to a neighbor and hurried away before anybody noticed that there were two of me there.

When I got back to realtime, I took a long shower, bandaged my wounds, and had two glasses of The Macallan, eighteen-year-old single malt.

The next morning, I called in a favor from Jimmy Wu at the SFPD database and had a search made for Peacelove, beginning in 1968.

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There was no sign of her.

"Shit, Chrissy, they were all called Peacelove that year," Jimmy said. "Or Morning Star or Rainbow. I need a real name, like Tammy or Katie or Sarah, and a social security number. A last name would help, too."

So the trail fizzled out in the backyard of a smoldering house on Potrero Hill, forty-six years ago. And nothing anomalous ever happened that I could detect—not one ripple of difference in the time line. MacHeath remained an orange cat with particular habits. I kept my job. San Francisco glittered as always in the chilly summer sunlight. I guess some people are just throw-away people. They don't make any difference at all, in any time.

Did she survive to adulthood? Or did she overdose in some gas station bathroom near Reseda when she was ten? Did I break every time law on the books merely to postpone her fate? I don't know—but I do know that I sleep better now.

The cuts healed. The memories faded. The rhythms of routine distract and comfort, thank God.

Three days ago, I got a call from a real estate agent in the Castro.

"I got your name from Jerry Raskin," she said.

"I'm not interested in downtime apartments," I replied.

She laughed a breathy laugh. "Oh, no. I only deal in realtime estate. And I've got two places I want to show you. The first is a beauty: a three-bedroom apartment in the Potrero Hill area. Used to be a two-family unit. You've got to see it to believe it."

I saw small, dirty handprints on glass.

"I work in the financial district," I said, when I could find my voice. "Where's the other one?"

"Near the Embarcadero." She stared at me out of the screen as though she thought I was crazy. "But it's not nearly as big. And the one on Potrero Hill has a view."

"I don't need a view," I said. "I've seen enough." ●

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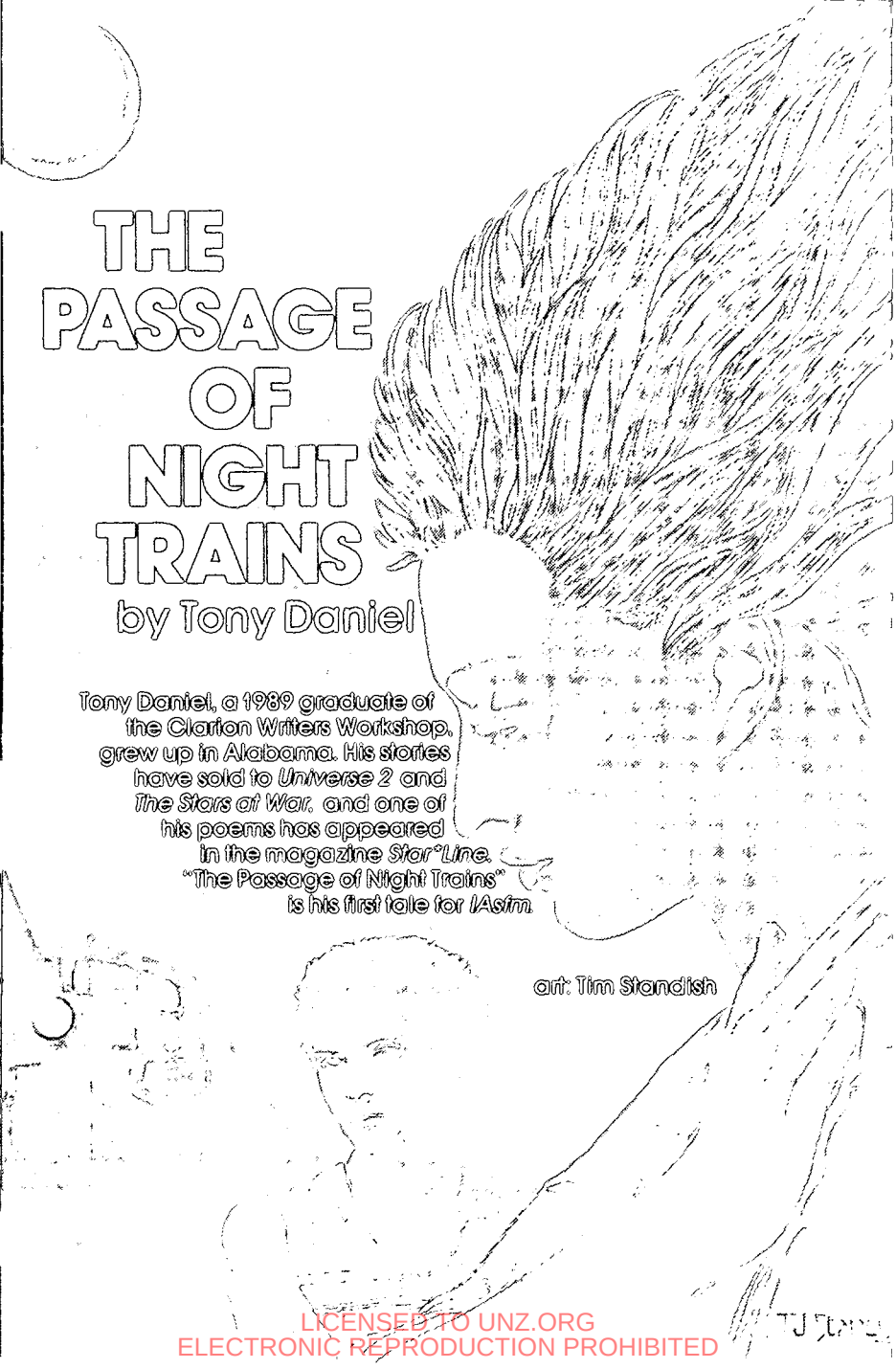
THE PASSAGE OF NIGHT TRAINS

by Tony Daniel

Tony Daniel, a 1989 graduate of the Clarion Writers Workshop, grew up in Alabama. His stories have sold to *Universe 2* and *The Stars at War*, and one of his poems has appeared in the magazine *Star*Line*. "The Passage of Night Trains" is his first tale for *IAsfm*.

art: Tim Standish



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Let me tell you about the first time I had sex, back when I was a teenager. Since I am your humble narrator, you may safely assume that I survived and lived to tell the tale. We were all at Carylyn Wharton's house out in Choccolocco, playing Spades fast and mean and for keeps—like those old cuss women who twist chicken necks for a living over at the Springville Farms poultry factory. Don't let anybody fool you: country kids are as mean as sin when it comes to cards—only there aren't really any country kids left, at least not around Anniston, Alabama. City and country abide together like grass growing through the cracks in a sidewalk. You can't tell one from the other anymore. The two are mixing—sometimes pleasantly, sometimes in bad, smelly ways, like that horrible peanut butter-jelly combo your mom bought for you when you were a pre-schooler that you promptly swirled to a goop. The suburbs, people call it: Purgatory, limbo, the screen between the dryer and clean, fresh air—where the lint collects.

Frankly, I love the place, the *idea*, of the 'burbs. Not that I'm planning on going back there to live, mind you. But when I go back to see friends and relatives, I am drawn to the city's tattered edges, particularly to that house out in Choccolocco. It tasks me, like a great white colonial whale, beached up here in the foothills of the Appalachians, scarred and decaying, but somehow still alive in parts, pouring primordial bile onto the land from its old (though not ancient) ruptured archetype of a soul.

Carylyn has long since moved out of the house. I have been careful not to see her these last fifteen years, though I always keep up with what she's doing, where she is. A young couple with fresh degrees in agriculture from Auburn, and, no doubt, fresh money from trust funds, bought the Wharton land five years ago and converted the place into a chicken farm.

Carylyn and her mom were barely making a go of it when I knew her. Frank Wharton, the dad, had the idea he was going to grow strawberries —acres of them—and undercut all those Northwest suppliers. And maybe he would have, if his tractor hadn't turned over on him and killed him while he was out in the fields one night (all the farmers I ever knew worked day jobs in the city). So here is the picture I have: misty Alabama morning. Carylyn walking through the ripe strawberries, barefoot (since I know she loved to dig her toes into her red clay Northeast Alabama soil). Her blonde hair tied out of her face with a handkerchief—never a bandana—printed in a flowery pattern. Rust of the dirt, dark red like old blood, staining her feet. Red spray of burst strawberries spattered across her ankles. She sees the tractor, upside down, one of its wheels slowly spinning. She starts to run, heedless across the strawberries. And finds her dad, and thinks: he has crushed so many strawberries; so many strawberries. She takes the hanky from her hair to wipe away the red

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stains, and her hair falls free around her face. Then the wrench of *knowing:* yanking her about, punching the wind out of her; then her spinning fall, setting swirls and eddies of morning mist spinning away across the field of little green plants. Her hanky settling, unheeded, across her father's blank, open eyes.

This image is only accurate in spirit, of course—I wasn't there—and I'm not telling you about this out of perversion. You need to know it, to feel it in your bones like Carylyn did, to understand the rest of what I will tell you. Because I think that sudden, amazing hurt burst Carylyn's heart, squeezed her soul past the breaking point, and spattered her over time, like a strawberry popped between hard fingers.

How do I know? Look at how she played Spades: furiously, always winning, as if she knew what was in all our hands—but it was not reflective knowledge, wisdom, or even cunning. More like the sense of smell for what cards are out, like peripheral vision in a wild animal: a knowledge one does not think about, ponder, but reacts to, uses fully and immediately. Carylyn had a power over all of time—as, say, a fox has power over the present, inhabiting the *now* with a bright and fierce completeness, so that there is only *this* moment and *this* place—and this fresh kill to feast on. And this night, this *story's* night, Carylyn and Gary Taber were partners and were beating the pants off of Sharlene Newnan and me.

For about a year and a half, this had been the group, the clique. There were others that latched on to our edges, came and went, but Carylyn, Sharlene, Gary, and I had gotten all four wheels of Carylyn's tank of a station wagon off the ground going over Tickle Hill (or Fuckerupandyerdeadboy Hill, as Gary and I called it, later shortened to just plain Fucker) at ninety-five miles per hour. After that momentous jump, Gary and Sharlene clung to one another in the back, Sharlene whining something about her pants. I looked over at Carylyn as she brought the station wagon to a stop. Her hands were sliding around a bit on the hard, plastic steering wheel, which was surprising, since she had such a tight grip. It was blood that was causing the slickness, blood from the gouges her nails had dug into her palms. She was breathing hard and sweating a little, and then she turned to me with a look of sheer exultation, like some little girl saint gone to God. Her breath washed over me, and I will swear to my dying day that it smelled like strawberries, the musky smell of a strawberry field at night. That was when I fell in love with her. That was when the four of us started laughing hysterically—even Sharlene—as the stench of urine suffused the car, driving out any smell of strawberries, real or imagined, and we knew—we all knew—that the four of us were going to be the best of friends.

* * *

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And now, a year and a half later, I knew Carylyn as well as a sister, and loved her still. I had even told her that I loved her. It was Friday, one of the chilled, quiet nights common in Alabama during October. The moon was full. This night Carylyn was to give me an answer, to tell me if she felt anything like what I felt. Instead, we were playing killer Spades, Carylyn and Gary trouncing Sharlene and me. Carylyn seemed to regret what she was doing, to be angry at herself for not being able to stop, but steadily made her bid, steadily set Sharlene and me into negative numbers I had thought were merely the figments of theoretical mathematicians' imaginations.

I kept trying to meet her eyes, those ice-blue glacier chips she had for eyes, but she was looking everywhere but at me. This bodes ill, I thought. She is very upset at having to tell me she hates me. Or she is excited and loves me. Which? Carylyn was not saying.

We all finally had to make Carylyn stop. Sharlene, not exactly a stoic, was pissed as hell at losing, and Gary was getting bored, it seemed. I was nervous and jittery and was playing even worse than usual. When would the woman *speak?* We went to the den of the old house, which used to be called the sun room in a simpler day before television and stain-resistant naugahyde beanbags. I suppose that the chicken-farm yuppies who inhabit the old house nowadays call it the sun room again.

Carylyn sipped on her cranapple juice. She drinks so much of the stuff, I thought, her insides must be as red as old stained glass by now. Sharlene had, I think, a diet cola. Since Carylyn's mother was out until later, Gary and I drank beers—something only boys did, not good girls, except on blast-out party nights, and even then girls sipped surreptitiously. The glass was shaking in Carylyn's hand. Her hands were small and thin-boned, like little quail babies, but normally they were controlled, as are baby bobwhite by their mother's stern coos and whistles. Carylyn was a pianist—hell, she could play almost any instrument—and damn good. I had never seen her with such trembly hands. Even when she'd got my love letter.

Now I do not claim to be a poet or anything, and at seventeen I was God-awful pretentious, but I put my heart into that letter, I opened up my soul—as much as a seventeen-year-old can be said to have one. People who know will tell you that Ben James—me—is closed and sometimes a cipher, and that is true, but I twisted myself into knots and wrung out the "L" word from my soul more than once for Carylyn in that letter. I could still quote it to you; those wringing wrinkles never came out, you see. But maybe I'd better spare you that, eh?

I watched her discover it on the inside door of her school locker, watched her amazement, the controlled hand precisely brush back an unruly

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strand of blonde hair, then cover her strawberry lips. She looked up, saw me. Bang. Her purposeful walk across the hall.

"We will talk about this," she said. There was tenderness in her voice. Pity? The beginnings of love? "We will talk about this Friday night. I never thought. . . ." But that was enough and she shut up, turned from me, and went to class. I had nothing but study hall the rest of the day, so I signed out sick, and went for a long, long drive in my old beat-up Chevy Nova.

That car was as brown as a mud flat on an overcast day, but I gunned it like I was hot shit and tore along country roads. Somehow I ended up in Choccolocco, at Carylyn's white house. No one was home, and I sat on the road just staring at it.

The house did not date back to antebellum days—probably wasn't as old as the twentieth century—but it did come from another time. This was a house from which a farmer and a gentleman could survey his land. There was a broad porch for sitting out on summer nights, for kids to play on, for dogs to lie under in the cool red dirt. There is precious little Hellenic pomposity in Northeast Alabama houses; there never were any plantations—just dirt farmers and slightly better-off dirt farmers who called themselves gentlemen and had scratched together enough to build the family a place to call home. That house had nurtured Carylyn, had made her into the natural, unaffected girl that I loved. To study the swing of its roof, the fall of its sides, was to learn more about her.

What I did not know, or did not realize, was that underneath the comfortable sway of the old, settled frame, the house's foundation was shot through, encrypted, with a series of cracks, thin and unfixable. Passing the house now, these fifteen years later, I can see the sag along the western side, the hump and bristle of the shingles. But though I remember still the cracks along the front steps, the shift of the porch when you stepped in certain places, those things did not register on me as a teenager. As with all houses, the place was working out its doom from the moment it was built. Was it the tiny swellings and contracting of years of capillary ice that crazed the house's supports, or was it some sudden jolt—the tumbling of a tractor, say, in a nearby field, the consequence of that crushing tumble reverberating through the land? Could such a thing break a home, set it to decaying?

Then there was a horrid scream—tortured air slicing across a thin metal blade—that was a train whistle telling me I was about to die if I didn't get my ass off the railroad tracks. I had stopped my Nova directly on the rails which formed the western boundary of the Wharton farm. For a moment, my hands could not find the keys—then they did, and for once I was thankful to my father ("she's an old clunker, but reliable as hell, Benjamin. You don't need any fancy sports mobile at your age. . . .")

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for the hand-me-down car. It cranked smoothly and jumped when I floored the accelerator. When the train came, I was way down the road, headed for home.

Friday nights seemed to be a busy time for the Southern Pacific line. Outside, a night train shook the ground and groaned and squeaked its way across the western fence line. Carylyn nearly spilled her cranapple juice when the train blew its horn at the crossing. She was as nervous as a horse before a storm. Then the train was gone, and silence seeped across the land, into the house, like the quiet stillness after a hard thundershower. Sharlene couldn't stand it; silence was a vacuum which some natural law forced her to fill. Or maybe Sharlene was a vacuum cleaner, sucking up the quiet like dirt on a carpet. But we loved Sharlene.

"Playing cards was boring tonight. Let's go cruise Bill's," she said.

Bill's was one of the last remaining drive-up-and-order joints in the state. It closed ten years ago.

"Let's don't and say we did," Gary said. When Gary was on, he could be very funny, but mostly he fell back on such stock witticisms.

"Well, what then?"

"Let's go walk the railroad tracks," I said, a bit startled, because I surely did not know I'd been thinking about doing it.

"Yes," said Carylyn, as if she *had* been wanting to do just that. "I'll go get a flashlight."

Gary got up. For once this night, he seemed interested in something. "Okay. I'll help you get the stuff."

He left with Carylyn.

"Sharlene, this might be scary," I said, raising my eyebrows, putting a touch of the maniac in my voice.

Sharlene gave a try at a brave smile, and shuffled herself around on the sofa into a more confident position.

"I'll be fine, Benjamin. Don't you worry about me."

"And I'll be with you, guarding your every step, keeping you from all harm," I said, flourishing the remains of my beer.

"Now *that's* enough to scare the pee out of me, Ben."

As if she realized the literal truth of her words, Sharlene got up and went down the hall that led deeper into the house—and to the bathroom. Better to be prepared.

I sat back, breathed deeply, and closed my eyes, listening. Sharlene's worn penny loafers clomped on the bare wood of the hall floor; then there was the creak of a door, and silence. She'd found the bathroom. From the other entrance to the den came the low murmur of Gary and Carylyn's voices, the banging of the closet doors where the flashlights were still kept. I knew because one night we were all there when Mr. Wharton had come in from night work in the fields and put a flashlight up. "If the

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power ever goes out on you folks, and you're here, this is where the flashlights are kept," he'd said. Then he'd taken a moment, pondered if this were the best place to keep them. "Right next to the water heater, so you'll get burned when you're groping for them," he'd said almost to himself. "But close to the back door." He nodded approval to himself and closed the closet on his decision to leave them there.

"He's like that," Carylyn had explained, smiling. She loved her father wholly and completely and I knew she wasn't making an apology for him. Just an explanation.

Then the rattling stopped, but Carylyn and Gary still did not come back into the den. I reached over for Carylyn's old Fender acoustic and strummed through my limited repertory of guitar chords. My feelings were pulled tight as the guitar's steel strings, and as messy as the sound I was making. Carylyn had made that guitar sing on occasion.

"We have an announcement," said Carylyn, coming back into the room in a rush and with a clumsiness uncommon to her. "Where's Sharlene?"

"Getting ready for our trip outside," I said. Carylyn looked flushed, beautiful in her confusion. I put the guitar down.

Gary gently moved Carylyn aside and stepped through the den's entrance.

"Carylyn and me are going steady," he said.

He put his arm around Carylyn's shoulder, raised his eyebrows up and down, up and down. Gary had thick brown eyebrows.

I felt the rise of beer in my gut, the ache of my fingers, sore from fretting metal strings.

"That's great," said Sharlene, coming into the room. "I kind of suspected you folks were leading up to that."

Carylyn's face was reddening, like she was about to cry. Like she'd just been kissed.

"I'm really happy for you," I said, rising, looking for a door, any door. There was the sliding glass window. I went to it.

I looked at Carylyn, trying to harden the muscles around my eyes, trying to harden my heart. She was fuzzy, though, watery, and I knew I was glaring through a sheen of my forming tears.

"I'm just going out for some air. I may be some time."

I'd just done a history report on Antarctic exploration. An expedition member had said something like that on the Scott trip to the South Pole—just before he went out of Scott's tent and committed suicide by exposure. Did tears freeze in the Antarctic wind, I wondered, and craze your eyeballs? Could heartbreak blind you there? Outside, it was very dark.

I looked again at Carylyn. Her flush had by now turned to a deeper redness. There was anguish in her eyes. I put my hand to the glass door,

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glanced back. The room was still, as if Old Time were drawing in its breath, getting ready to make a run for it. Carylyn brought her hand to her temple, as if an acute pain had shot through her, or a startling thought.

Then I was somehow in the middle of the strawberry fields, and the bottoms of my blue jeans were soaked from misted leaves. At first, I thought that the red haze of my hurt had stripped away the memory of my exit. But I was not conscious of a skip in time of the sort you might think memory loss would bring: a hitch, a scratch, and then you are two lyrics further into the song that was playing on your turntable. Instead, I felt the moment widening, the present sloshing up against the future's shore like the wave from a big boat's wake slapping against a pier. It was as if I were picked up by that wave and pushed forward and above time in the rush of the swell. It didn't set me down easy, though.

There was a depression, a slight downslope to the ground, and I tripped and fell, through the night, under spinning stars. I had no way to gauge where the ground was, and, when I hit, it slapped my breath away. My left arm was twisted under me, full of the pain of bending too goddamn far in the wrong direction.

And worst, the very worst, Carylyn was beside me, standing over me. "Oh, Ben," she said. "I didn't mean to come here. This is a very dangerous place, Ben. Please sit up, Ben. Please."

She said "please" like I was some small child bent on annoying her. But I pulled myself upright, and couldn't help groaning, even though I didn't want to show any feeling. No fucking pain at all when you rip out my heart, Carylyn. Such nimble, musician's fingers. How about doing my brain now? Then the stars locked into position. I looked around in the dark, still air. Clear. Everything was perfectly clear.

"This is the ditch that tumbled over your dad's tractor."

Carylyn didn't say anything, but I knew it was true.

"Why did you . . . why *Gary?*"

"He's funny. He's going to be class president."

"He's on the football team."

"Yes—"

"Shit, Carylyn."

She was sitting beside me now. Where was Gary? Sharlene? Carylyn's dress, it was calico, was spread wide over the strawberries.

"—and he just wants me for his girl, you know. Just for a girlfriend." Her face was crinkled and hard.

"He doesn't love you. *I* love you."

"That's *it,* don't you see?"

I did not want to see, didn't want Carylyn Wharton to explain away her not returning my love.

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But for what I said next, there is no excuse.

"This is where you fucked Gary, isn't it?"

Carylyn rose to her feet; her hands flew to her sides like flushed quail. She began to rhythmically smooth her dress.

"It's the perfect place. Can't see it from the house; it's in a depression. Just the right size for a blanket. Or did you do it on the bare ground?"

Carylyn sobbed hard, but held it back, shut it off, in the middle. "I can't believe you'd think that of me, Ben," she said. "What do you think I am?"

"Where's Sharlene? Where's *Gary?*" I spoke the last name in a low growl which seeped with irony, like black juice from a rotting plum.

For a moment, Carylyn was startled by this question.

"I had to get you and me away; I had to talk to you. But not here, not here," she said.

It is hard to describe what Carylyn looked like at this moment. Maybe like a saint in epiphany; maybe like a kid who has just discovered, say, that bugs will squash when stepped on. Carylyn turned from what looked like revelation, as if she *were* that child, revolted by some new knowledge. She regained control over her expression, just like she had regained control over the adrenalin rush of jumping her station wagon off the ground when the smell of Sharlene's piss hit her. I suppose the piss smell of the moment was the contempt in my voice.

"I don't know where Sharlene and Gary are," she said. "I thought for sure they were right behind me. You fairly flew out of the den, Ben."

"What did you mean you 'just had to get you and me away'?"

Again she started. Then she set her jaw, and gave me a look of consternation.

"I don't . . . you said some pretty awful things to me. I don't think I owe you any more kindness." She drew back like a cottonmouth, preparing to deliver the final blow. "Gary and I are going together. I really like him. You and I can stay friends—or not. It's up to you and I really don't care. You're so . . . intense, Ben. Just leave me alone."

The old house glinted dark and white behind her, like bone half-hidden in a deep cut. Carylyn gripped her dress and spun about, then started back toward the house with determination. I nursed my arm—and my feelings—for a moment. I thought about what I'd said, what she had said.

Maybe she loved me. It was just that she did not want to know, could not go to that place where love dwelled. Because that was where her father still was, forever tumbling over and over in the night—the blaring flash of tractor lights, the bursting of his strong heart under all that dead weight of metal. To know whether or not she loved me was to go to that place. Love did not demand it. Love did not care. It was, rather, a condition of love, just as if you want to see the stars, you have to go

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out into the night. The stars don't care; that's just the way the world works. Carylyn was afraid of that sort of night.

As I watched Carylyn walk back toward the house, I knew this thing. So what if she'd kissed Gary? So what if she'd slept with him? He was just a means, a tool, for avoiding pain, for avoiding love. Maybe love for me.

"Carylyn, I . . ." My voice filled the quiet October air.

She walked a ways, stopped, stood with her back to me.

Do you love me? Is it the heart that avoids the question, as a wild animal circles and circles food held out in your open palm? Is it the mind, constructing imaginary walls in empty air? *Do you love me, Carylyn?*

And why did you let *Gary* tell me about you two?

So I said nothing, and she returned to the house. After a while, I got up and walked to the railroad tracks.

The rails stretched away north and south in a sickly white line, luminous from the moon. The gravel bed crunched and rolled under my feet as I climbed the bank. It was hard-packed between the ties, and I stood very still when I reached the top, looking both ways down the tracks. The wind picked up a trifle, or maybe I was just more exposed, above the calming tree walls of the farm's windbreaks.

Down the tracks a few hundred feet north was a little tower with a signal light on top of it. This was the conductor's last resort, if radio contact failed and he was roaring on through the silent night without a clue as to whether other trains were coming just as fast to meet him. If the light were green, all was well; if red, he'd better jam on the brakes and then do what humans could do, but trains never could—get the hell off the railroad tracks.

Tonight the light was green to the north. I began to walk toward it, along the tracks, mostly because it was a prominent, unique thing to head for. You could, I thought, go quietly insane along these tracks at night. Even here in the 'burbs, walking railroads was a lonely business, all whites and greys and blacks. I could swear I felt the moon pulling with a subtle gravity, working me back and forth like a tongue working a tooth, working me loose so it could suck me off into space before the old earth noticed. And these tracks, looking so straight, but running off into the darkness and disappearing, like they'd gone over the planet's horizon, following the curve of the earth around until maybe they met themselves on the other side. Maybe at night these tracks went in circles.

When I heard the warning whistle this time, I knew what it was from experience. A train, a freight train probably—maybe *the* train, *the one that circles round and round the earth through the darkness, belching fire and throwing blue-green sparks into the dry kindling world. The Night Train.* And the whistle was the air horn the conductor must blow a half-

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mile up from the crossing, even if no one is there, even if no one gives a damn. At that instant, in that chilly October night, I decided that I was no one and that I didn't give a damn.

What if you laid down in the center of a railroad track and let a train pass over you? Would something—a bit of dangling metal, a whipping cable—catch you and tear your ever-loving heart from your burning chest, split you from your balls to your brains? Or could it be done? Could you live? And if you did, would the scream of it, the fright, shake your mind back into solution, back into flux, destroying the arches and towers that precipitated out of too much settle, too much pondering—those elaborate crystal arabesques—like love, like grief over lost love? If you lived, would you be reborn? Clean from hurt, from having hurt?

I resolved to try. I was seventeen, and I thought I had nothing to lose.

With a certain mad deliberation, I laid down between the rails, with my arms straight beside me. The train seemed to take forever getting there. I felt the rumble of its approach, fought the urge to shift position. My feet were pointed straight toward it. Just before the train arrived, I lowered my head back into the gravel between two ties, pressed down with my skull as if lowering my head would somehow keep me out of harm's way. The hard pack of gravel did not give. I breathed out; my body was not going to get any lower.

Then the train was over me, before I had a chance to realize my awful mistake, to roll clear and scream in relief and amazement. I was going to die.

I can't tell you how hard it was to keep from sitting up. What the hell, I thought, at least if I jam my head up into a passing boxcar carriage it will have been *my* decision. I will know when to expect the pain; I can prepare. Then I started laughing. Prepare? How do you prepare to have your brains splattered in a straight red line parallel to the Southern Pacific railroad tracks? Close your eyes and hold your breath? Try to think pleasant, wholesome thoughts? I just couldn't stop laughing.

Mostly I saw nothing, heard only the roar and sing of the rails, smelled grease and hot metal. Occasinally wheel and rail did not meet perfectly and sparks shot across my vision. There was a flicker of light in my eyes' periphery. Carefully, I turned my head and saw that it was the play of the moon and the moon shadows of the train wheels. There was no real syncopation in the shadows' changing, but after a while I noticed a certain kind of rhythm, a kind of code. A language, maybe—but incomprehensible, like a trickle of conversation from a great distance, across a lake in the morning, maybe, when the air is flat, still, and thick—just the edges of meaning come to you. And this was utterly incomprehensible, for what can a human being (more specifically a scared shitless seven-

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teen-year-old boy) understand of the talk between trains and the full moon.

This was when I figured I'd gone crazy for sure. I might survive this ordeal, this passage, but I would rise in the aftermath as a complete lunatic, blathering on about some deep and portentous secret that the October moon gave me. And maybe that *is* what happened.

The last of the train rattled overhead and passed on into the darkness. The caboose passed like a storm breaking after a long build-up of thunder and dirty skies. It crackled past like lightning, leaving the electrical scent of ozone and hot metal. Or was it strawberries?

Was it strawberries, barely ripe, acrid and sweet all at once?

The woman stood over me, the moon silvering one side of her face, the other side fanned with black shadows like overlapping, shifting veils. She wore a black dress, or else there was not enough light to give it color. The maniacal laughter died in my chest. She wore a dark sweater, just lighter than her dress. Green?

I grabbed one of the rails; it was still warm from the train's passing. I pulled myself up, leaned over the side of the railroad mound, and wretched until my stomach was dry. The woman stood silently by. I was too busy to notice whether she had a look of disgust, or pity, or amusement.

"You really *did* it, didn't you, Ben James," said the woman. "Just like you said you did." Her voice was soft, intense—with the sound of home in it.

I couldn't speak, not then. I sat for a moment, wiped my face slowly, laced my fingers over my quivering knees. After a while, the woman offered me her hand, and I, almost without thinking, took it and stood up, still shaking.

What can I say to you so that you'll believe me? There was only the harvest moon's light, only my jangled, skittering perception. The flash of blonde hair, tied back with a handkerchief. The willowy curve of her face. The woman was Carylyn. But Carylyn changed, transformed, like a house you lived in years ago, back when the big pine in the front was a sapling, back before the new owners put in the chimney, the rose bed along the driveway. You haven't seen this house since you moved, you're just driving by on a whim, an impulse—but you know the house when you see it. You remember.

"Do you remember me, Ben James?" she said. "It's been a long time. I'm Carylyn Wharton. You once wrote me a letter, a wonderful letter. I still have it."

Her eyes were bright and cold, with the black sparkle of ice in moonlight. Her hands were hovering in the air between us, almost touching my own hands—almost, but not quite. They were Carylyn's hands all

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right, quail sitting in brush, ready to start, ready to fly into the sky if I made any sudden, unexpected moves. Then the tension went out of her and she dropped her arms to her side. Her eyes still flashed darkly.

"You can't be her," I said. My voice was very loud in my ears, even over the ring and buzz left from the train's passing.

"This is the suburbs, Benjamin. Anything can happen here."

I laughed, but it was more like a cough, an expulsion of air. I turned quickly and began walking down the tracks, away from Carylyn—no, away from this woman, whoever she was. You just did an incredibly stupid thing, I told myself. You laid down under a train. Now you're seeing things; you're temporarily insane. The girl just jilted you, and so your brain is manufacturing this hallucination. You are fulfilling your wishes; you are *dreaming,* buckaroo, so wake up and find out if you are really alive, or if the train cut off your head. Maybe you're *really* lying in the tracks bleeding to death, with your arm squirming around down at the bottom of the hill. Maybe it's years from then, that night, and you have been in Bryce, where they put the crazies in Tuscaloosa, and Carylyn has visited you after all this time, out of pity. And all you can do to show your hospitality is to open up the doors of your delusion and say: "Come on in. Let me show you around. This is Ben James's famous arm stump, which, after all these years, he still has not realized the train cut off. And here is the stump of his brain, in much the same condition." But this was too weird—and then I felt her hand on my shoulder. Carylyn's hand. I stopped, breathed hard. I turned around.

"Who are you?" I said. "Carylyn's aunt or something?"

"I'm really Carylyn."

"You're old."

"I'm thirty-two," she said. "I'm still young yet."

I shook my head, more from confusion than from disbelief.

"*Carylyn* is back in the house," I said.

"Yes, watching television with Gary and Sharlene. Trying to forget you, Ben. I remember that night. I remember." Her eyes fell for a moment and she shuddered, as if she were fighting off some sadness, some grief. Then she raised and turned her head, looking out over the strawberry farm, east toward the house. Farther east, the lights of Anniston were a low, white fire on the horizon.

What if I believed her? What if this were really Carylyn? Carylyn come back to say oh how sorry she was, she certainly didn't mean to cut me open, crush my heart. Oh, she was so very sorry.

"So what are you going to tell me? You came back to tell me you made a mistake or something?" I said.

And she was beautiful. Those fifteen years had taken a frumpy, pretty girl, cut back on a bulge here, rounded and shaped a curve there. She

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was hot stuff in the moonlight, and was turning me the hell on. God*damn* her. I'd just let this girl drive a train over me, and I wasn't going to let her do it again.

" 'Cause I don't want your pity. Don't need it."

And I'm not going to fall for you again, never for *you,* you incredible woman standing in the middle of the train tracks with the wind whipping your black skirt and the edges of your blonde hair glowing like a gold-and-silver moonlight sieve. Never for you, even though you are full of adventure and will do anything, *anything,* even come back in time to tell a shit-out-of-luck teenage lover that you are sorry you jilted him fifteen years ago and have regretted it all these years. Forget it, Carylyn, because I am strong. I don't need you and never will. I survived a *freight train,* and I don't need your pretty little hanky to wipe away my tears.

"I didn't come back to apologize, Ben," Carylyn said. She looked me in the eyes so fiercely that I had to turn away. Then she took my chin and turned my gaze back to her. All right, I thought, all right. I can look at you; I can stand it.

"I came back to fuck you," said Carylyn.

She took my hand in hers and began to lead me down the railroad tracks.

"You were right about Gary and me, but not in the way you think," she said. I tried to pull away, but she held my hand tight and kept walking. "It was a week later than now, in the front seat of Gary's Plymouth. Just some groping, some inept touching, and finally I had to take over and guide him every step of the way into me. It wasn't very pleasant. And you wonder why I did it?"

I said nothing. This was insane. One week from today? What if I went and tried to stop it. Wouldn't I bring the universe down on all our heads?

"Because I wanted to get it *over* with. I wanted to get all those feelings over with," she said. We were nearing the point where I'd first climbed onto the tracks. "You were right about how much Daddy's dying hurt me. I didn't know; I wouldn't let myself see—for years."

We began to descend into the strawberry field.

"I loved you, Ben. You were so romantic and funny. Of course I loved you. I never got over you."

It sounds morbid, perhaps perverted, to have made love in the little depression where I tripped and fell, where the tractor had rolled and crushed a life. Instead, there was never a better, more natural thing to do. Carylyn and I came together like the edges of a cut, exploring ways of joining, grasping here and here, forming bonds. It was an act of healing. Of course, Carylyn did most of the grasping at the beginning, the directing of the process. I had not a clue, and she knew everything. But I was neither forward and over-eager nor a dunce at it. I am not ashamed

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of what I did. There was no shame, no anger or hurt in us. We laid out our clothes for bedding, but these were soon pushed into a couple of clumps. Soon we were on the leaves of strawberry plants, and on the cool, red earth. Northeast Alabama clay cannot sustain a strawberry crop that pays, maybe, but its slickness and firmness makes it ideal for some uses.

Radiant fog rose off the ground and shrouded us, and Carylyn told me not to worry anyway, that no one had come looking for me this night. Carylyn had not because she was ashamed; Gary because he was caught up in his new conquest; Sharlene because walking around alone at night scared the piss out of her.

I had come into the den much later, she said. When they asked me, I told them I'd gone for a long walk on the railroad tracks, that I'd lain down under a train. This perked them all up and they wanted to know more, everything. But I wasn't talking much. It was as if I had my mind on something else and couldn't pay attention.

"It started seeping into my brain, then," said Carylyn. She was sitting up, her breasts a flash of white across her tanned shoulders and stomach. I was beneath her, my head on her lap. I was completely spent, trembling and warm. She ran her fingers through my hair.

She was silent for a long while. Then she spoke quietly. She was crying a little.

"Will you forgive me?"

"I love you, Carylyn," I said. And what I said was true. For that love has abided all these years. I love her still.

"Something happens when we get together, when both of us feel strong emotions, Ben. Even if we are only at the same place, years apart. Time, you know, seems to change, to get redirected in the way I want it to go, just for the two of us. I was at the tracks tonight, looking at the mess the new people have made of the farm. Regretting things. . . ."

She sat me up, and I faced her. She was naked, mottled with mud and crushed strawberries, her hair still bound with a hanky, but full of leaves.

"I didn't see the train coming until it was almost on top of me," she said. "I've never been so scared in my life."

"Are you dead, Carylyn?" I said, trembling from more than the October chill.

She thought about this for some time.

"I don't know. It took me years to feel as alive as I feel tonight. If this is death, then it's not so bad."

Then she shivered, as if a wind which I did not feel, could not detect, was blowing through her body, through her heart.

"I think that I have to go," she said.

We put our clothes back on. Mine were dirty, but her black dress's color hid most of the mud we'd gotten on it.

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"And what the hell am I supposed to do now," I said. Carylyn was looking toward the tracks, looking like she was leaving.

Anyway, I already knew the answer to that question.

I walked her back to the tracks, and we kissed long and hard before we parted. With a flourish and a laugh, she pulled the hanky from her hair and handed it to me. I stood clutching it for all I was worth, watching her walk toward the signal tower and disappear into the autumn darkness. With an effort, I descended from the tracks and made my way across the fields toward the light and warmth of the old house's den, and the blue flicker of the television around which my three friends were gathered.

And now there is the familiar flicker of moon through train wheels in front of me, a language which perhaps I understand, which maybe I catch pieces of in fits and starts. I think I have grown a bit wiser in fifteen years. But I have always had a bit of wisdom in my pocket—sometimes obscured by ambition, boredom, the smoke you raise as you drive on down that dirt road. I have always known two things: always carry a good handkerchief with you, and always keep love alive. In the end, it's all we have.

There was no screech of metal on metal, only the long blasting of the train's horn. I was behind her all the while, as she sat on those tracks, lost in memory. I have been watching her for many years now, keeping track, biding until she was ready, until she felt she was again alive.

Something happens to time when we two get together and feel strong emotions, she said. She shunted the flow, fifteen years ago, just for a moment, in the direction she wished time to go. I have a piece of her memory woven into a floral pattern on cloth. There is a power in good memories, and with this relic, this remnant of her passing, I have come to believe I have something of her ability, too.

The caboose is coming now. I see it down the tracks, glinting blood red in the moonlight. Soon I will know if she got off the tracks in time. But she *did,* I feel it like lightning crackling through me, like a knifeblade glinting bright moonlight in my eyes. For I have reached out with this knife, and made my cut, hollowed out a space for Carylyn's refuge on the other side of these tracks, as a man will carve his love's name into an old tree's skin. I felt the upsurge of power, the subtle, strong blend of her fear and my love as the train approached. I've reached out and pushed her away, into the nick of time, with the rough grace of true love.

And now the train has passed, and I will cross the tracks. ●

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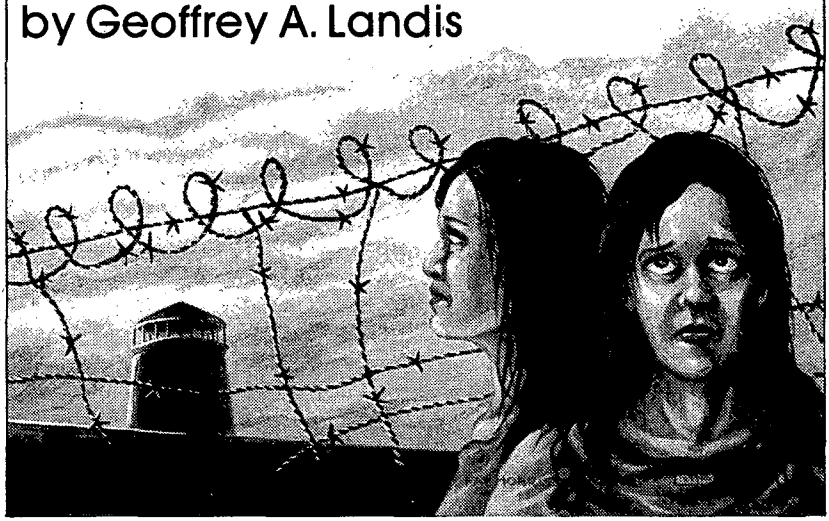
REALM OF THE SENSES

by Geoffrey A. Landis



Geoffrey A. Landis returns to our pages with another of his powerful tales. A previous work, "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" (*IAsfm*, October 1988), recently received the Nebula award for Best Short Story.

art: Pat Morrissey

Disorientation and transformation: a maelstrom of lights and sound and color. She screamed.

Reb Shenkel would really rather have had a son, but he loved his daughter no less for his disappointment. The family had no abundance, but there was always enough, and Rachel grew up enfolded in an atmosphere of unspoken love.

When Rachel reached thirteen she was betrothed, and for the first time met the boy she was to marry. He was tall and awkward, two years older than she, from the next village down the river, where she would go to live when she was married. His name was Isaac. He had dark liquid eyes, and she dreamed of him for weeks. He would come over on the Sabbath for dinner, tongue-tied, but unable to keep his eyes off her. Between them there passed a secret understanding. Later, still a year

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from the wedding, she gave herself to him, completely, unreservedly. He was shy and awkward there, too, and she had to show him what to do (she, who surely could have had no more experience than he!), but the next time was better, and the time after that better yet. She didn't love him, no, but she had a deep affection for him, and for the moment that was enough. Love, her parents would say contentedly, comes later, after years of marriage. She lived in a world of contentment.

Her world was a circumscribed one, isolated far from the tumult and discord of the world at large. From time to time a traveler would come from outside, and the elders would cluck their tongues at the news from the world, marveling at the folly of man, and light-heartedly speculating that such tidings of disaster surely must mean that the end of all things could not be far away. But the distant news did not much affect their village, save only that itinerant peddlers came less frequently, and on occasion they could see on the horizon the haze of distant smoke. Then one day faint booming sounds could be heard from the distance, and all that day and the next they continued, gradually growing louder. Artillery, said Elder Heilman, the most learned man in the village, who had once traveled as far as distant Krakow before he settled down. The noise went away, but it left behind a feeling of uneasiness in the village, some unspecified dread that no one would speak of directly.

And then the soldiers came, barking out peremptory commands in a guttural language that she could barely understand. They herded all the villagers together in the fields. A few of them resisted, dragging out ancient rifles from God alone knows what hiding places. Among them was Isaac. He was torn apart by the German machine guns and left to lie in the dust, his eyes registering nothing but surprise, his mouth open as if he had just one more word to say, a truth of great importance, that now no one would ever know. The remaining villagers were crowded into wooden wagons drawn by oxen. The village livestock was slaughtered, and the carcasses loaded onto other ox-drawn wagons. As they left, she could see the flames of the burning village behind her.

In the confusion she had somehow become separated from her parents. They had been loaded on a different wagon, and though she searched for them while the villagers were huddled together with a thousand others at the railway station, she never saw them again.

At the camp, she found true love, in a thin, dark-haired girl named Drusilla. Her ear lobes had been shredded where gold earrings had been ripped out by the soldiers. She was thin and dark with long black hair where Rachel was large and peasantish. She was Romany, and spoke Rachel's language slowly and hesitantly, with peculiar syntax and occasional struggling for words. Nevertheless they would chatter endlessly, at every chance they could. They shared what little food they got, bread

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and thin soup and the occasional insect they could catch, and combed one another's hair.

It was there that Rachel discovered that Isaac had left her a present, as her belly began to round out even as the rest of her wasted away. She and Drusilla would wonder what sort of world the child would be born to, but that, she knew, was entirely in the hands of God.

Many of the younger girls would offer themselves to the guards, in a futile hope to earn themselves special treatment, but Drusilla and Rachel both vowed never to do such a thing. At night, as they lay crowded together on their narrow shelf, Drusilla would gently stroke Rachel's hair and speak to her softly in her own language, while Rachel would rub her belly, staring into space and thinking of nothing at all.

They could tell that the war was not going well for their captors. The incinerators ran day and night, and replacement guards were ever fewer and ever younger boys. Eventually there was no more bread, and as one week without food went on to another, Rachel knew that her child would never be born alive. She sorrowed for the memory of poor Isaac, whose son would now never walk in his father's footsteps.

Once again there were distant booms to be heard on the horizon. Work at the camp stepped up to a frantic pace.

When at last they were stripped and led into the chambers, Drusilla and Rachel held hands. As the gas began to hiss, while others held their hands over their mouths or tried to hold their breath, they began to softly sing.

Unimaginably far away in both space and time, she returned home.

"Don't you agree," they asked (although not in words; words were far too clumsy and awkward), "that was an experience like no other?"

"Staggering," she said, "Such intensity! And the best part, the most important, was the overwhelming sense of *finite*ness. Whatever happened, it would last only a little while. Such a feeling of," she paused, struggling for the right concept, *"poignancy!"*

"And I loved the way that your memory was removed right at the beginning," said another, "so you could experience it without preconceptions. That was half of what made it so intense!"

"Pain," she said, struggling over the concept. "That was another thing. Such an incredible concept. I've never felt anything like it."

"There's a waiting line of almost fifty years," said another. "Let's go again! I hear the next show is going to be even better than the one we just did!"

"Indeed? Let's! What is this one called?"

"I think they call the next show 'Nuclear Holocaust.' "

"I can hardly wait!" she said. ●

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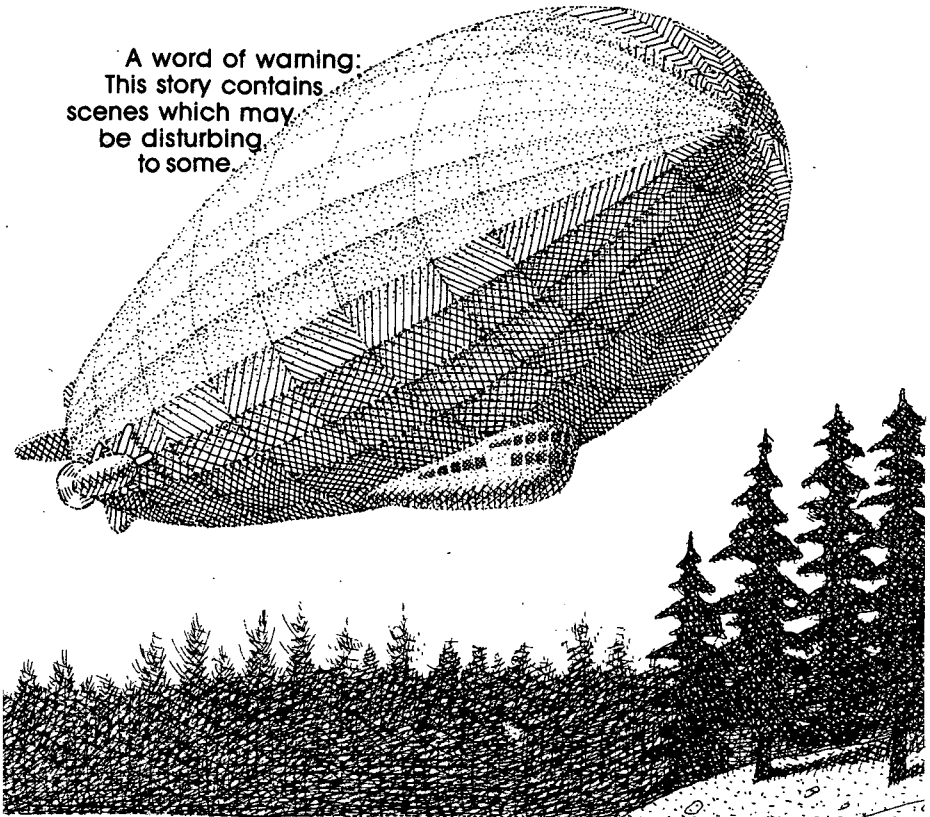

Part One of Two

STATIONS OF THE TIDE

by Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick has a hardcover edition of his novella, "Gryphon's Egg," forthcoming from Legend Publishing in England, and his collection of short fiction, *Gravity's Angels*, will be out soon from Arkham House. The author's short story, "The Edge of the World" (*Full Spectrum II*), was a recent finalist for the 1990 Hugo award.

art: Terry Lee

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art: Bob Walter

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The bureaucrat fell from the sky.

For an instant Miranda lay blue and white beneath him, the icecaps fat and ready to melt, and then he was down. He took a highspeed across the stony plains of the Piedmont to the heliostat terminus at Port Richmond, and caught the first flight out. The airship *Leviathan* lofted him across the fall line and over the forests and coral hills of the Tidewater. Specialized ecologies were astir there, preparing for the transforming magic of the jubilee tides. In ramshackle villages and hidden plantations people made their varied provisions for the evacuation.

The *Leviathan*'s lounge was deserted. Hands clasped behind him, the bureaucrat stared moodily out the stern windows. The Piedmont was dim and blue, a storm front on the horizon. He imagined the falls, where fishhawks hovered on rising thermals and the river Noon cascaded down and lost its name. Below, the Tidewater swarmed with life, like bluegreen mold growing magnified in a petri dish. The thought of all the mud and poverty down there depressed him. He yearned for the cool, sterile environments of deep space.

Bright specks of color floated on the brown water, coffles of houseboats being towed upriver as the haut-bourgeoise prudently made for the Port Richmond incline while the rates were still low. He touched a window control and the jungle leaped up at him, misty trees resolving into individual leaves. The heliostat's shadow rippled along the north bank of the river, skimming lightly over mud flats, swaying phragmites and gnarled water oaks. Startled, a clutch of acorn-mimetic octopi dropped from a low branch, brown circles of water fleeing as they jetted into the silt.

"Smell that air," Korda's surrogate said.

The bureaucrat sniffed. He smelled the faint odor of soil from the baskets of hanging vines, and a sweet whiff of droppings from the wicker birdcages. "Could use a cleansing, I suppose."

"You have no romance in your soul." The surrogate leaned against the windowsill, straight-armed, looking like a sentimental skeleton. The flickering image of Korda's face reflected palely in the glass. "I'd give anything to be down here in your place."

"Why don't you, then?" the bureaucrat asked sourly. "You have seniority."

"Don't be flippant. This is not just another smuggling case. The whole concept of technology control is at stake here. If we let just one self-replicating technology through—well, you know how fragile a planet is. If the Division has any justification for its existence at all, it's in exactly this sort of action. So I would appreciate it if just this once you would make the effort to curb your negativism."

"I have to say what I think. That's what I'm being paid for, after all."

"A very common delusion." Korda moved away from the window, bent to pick up an empty candy dish, and glanced at its underside. There was

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a fussy nervousness to his motions strange to one who had actually met him. Korda in person was heavy and lethargic. Surrogation seemed to bring out a submerged persona, an overfastidious little man normally kept drowned in flesh. "Native pottery always has an unglazed area on the bottom, have you noticed?"

"That's where it stands in the kiln." Korda looked blank. "This is a planet, it has a constant gravity. You can't fire things in zero-gravity here."

With a baffled shake of his head, Korda put down the dish. "Was there anything else you wanted to cover?" he asked.

"I put in a Request For—"

"—Authority. Yes, yes, I have it on my desk. I'm afraid it's right out of the question. Technology Transfer is in a very delicate position with the planetary authorities. Now don't look at me like that. I routed it through offworld ministry to the Stone House, and they said no. They're touchy about intrusions on their autonomy down here. They sent the Request straight back. With restrictions—you are specifically admonished not to carry weapons, perform arrests or in any way represent yourself as having authority to coerce cooperation on your suspect's part." He reached up and tilted a basket of vines, so he could fossick about among them. When he let it go, it swung irritably back and forth.

"How am I going to do my job? I'm supposed to—what?—just walk up to Gregorian and say, Excuse me, I have no authority even to speak to you, but I have reason to suspect that you've taken something that doesn't belong to you, and wonder if you'd mind terribly returning it?"

There were several writing desks built into the paneling under the windows. Korda swung one out and made a careful inventory of its contents: paper, charcoal pens, blotters. "I don't see why you're being so difficult about this," he said at last. "Don't pout, I know you can do it. You're competent enough when you put your mind to it. Oh, and I almost forgot, the Stone House has agreed to assign you a liaison. Someone named Chu, out of internal security."

"Will he have authority to arrest Gregorian?"

"In theory, I'm sure he will. But you know planetary government—in practice I suspect he'll be more interested in keeping an eye on you."

"Terrific." Ahead, a pod of sounding clouds swept toward them, driven off of Ocean by winds born half a world away. The *Leviathan* lifted its snout a point, then plunged ahead. The light faded to grey, and rain drenched the heliostat. "We don't even know where to find the man."

Korda folded the desk back into the wall. "I'm sure you won't have any trouble finding someone who knows where he is."

The bureaucrat glared out into the storm. Raindrops drummed against the fabric of the gas bag, pounded the windows and were driven down. Winds bunched the rain in great waves, alternating thick washes of water with spates of relative calm. The land dissolved, leaving the airship suspended in chaos. The din of rain and straining engines made it difficult to talk. It felt like the end of the world. "You realize that in a few months,

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all this will be under water? If we haven't settled Gregorian's case by then, it'll never be done."

"You'll be done long before then. I'm sure you'll be back at the Puzzle Palace in plenty of time to keep your sub from taking over your post." Korda's face smiled, to indicate that he was joking.

"You didn't tell me you'd given someone my duties. Just who do you have subbing for me anyway?"

"Philippe was gracious enough to agree to hold down the fort for the duration."

"Philippe!" There was a cold prickling at the back of his neck, as if sharks were circling overhead. "You gave my post to Philippe?"

"I thought you liked Philippe."

"I like him fine," the bureaucrat said. "But is he right for the job?"

"Don't take it so personally. There's work to be done, and Philippe is very good at this sort of thing. Should the Division grind to a halt just because you're away? Frankly, that's not an attitude I want to encourage."

The surrogate reopened the writing desk, removed a television set, and switched it on. The sound boomed and he turned it down to the mumbling edge of inaudibility. He flipped through the channels, piling image upon image, dissatisfied with them all.

The *Leviathan* broke free of the clouds. Sunlight flooded the lounge, and the bureaucrat blinked, dazzled. The airship's shadow on the bright land below was wrapped in a diffuse rainbow. The ship lifted joyously, searching for the top of the sky.

"Are you looking for something on that thing, or just fidgeting with it because you know it's annoying?"

Korda looked hurt. He straightened, turning his back on the set. "I thought I might find one of Gregorian's commercials. It would give you some idea what you're up against. Never mind. I really do have to be getting back to work. Be a good lad, and see if you can't handle this thing in an exemplary fashion, hmm? I'm relying on you."

They shook hands, and Korda's face vanished from the surrogate. On automatic, the device returned itself to storage.

"Philippe!" the bureaucrat said. "Those bastards!" He felt sickly aware that he was losing ground rapidly. He had to wrap this thing up, and get back to the Puzzle Palace as quickly as possible. Philippe was the acquisitive type. He leaned forward and snapped off the television.

When the screen went dead, everything was subtly changed, as if a cloud had passed from the sun, or a window opened into a stuffy room.

He sat for a time, thinking. The lounge was all air and light, with sprays of orchids arranged in sconces between the windows and rainbirds singing in the wicker cages hung between the pots of vines. It was appointed for the tourist trade but, ironically, planetary authority had closed down the resorts in the Tidewater to discourage those selfsame tourists, experience having shown offworlders to be less tractable to

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evacuation officers than were natives. Yet for all their obvious luxury, the fixtures had been designed with economy of weight foremost and built of the lighthest materials available, cost be damned. They'd never recover the added expense with fuel savings; it had all been done to spite the offworld battery manufacturers.

The bureaucrat was sensitive to this kind of friction. It arose wherever the moving edge of technology control touched on local pride.

"Excuse me, sir." A young man entered, carrying a small table. He was wearing an extraordinary gown, all shimmering moons and stars, ogres and ibises woven into a cloth that dopplered from deepest blue to profoundest red and back again as he moved. He set the table down, drew a cloth away from the top to reveal a fishbowl without any fish, and extended a white-gloved hand. "I'm Lieutenant Chu, your liaison officer."

They shook. "I thought I was to be assigned somebody from internal security," the bureaucrat said.

"We like to keep a low profile when we operate in the Tidewater, you understand." Chu opened the robe. Underneath he was dressed in airship corps blues. "Currently, I'm posing as an entertainment officer." He spread his arms, tilted his head coquettishly, as if waiting for a compliment. The bureaucrat decided he did not like Chu.

"This is ludicrous. There's no need for all this hugger-mugger. I only want to talk with the man, that's all."

A disbelieving smile. Chu had cheeks like balls and a small, star-shaped mark by his left eye that disappeared when his mouth turned up. "What will you do when you catch up with him then, sir?"

"I'll interview him to determine whether he's in possession of contraband technology. Then, if it develops that he is, it's my job to educate him as to his responsibilities and convince him to return it. That's all I'm authorized to do."

"Suppose he says no. What will you do then?"

"Well, I'm certainly not going to beat him up and drag him off to prison, if that's what you mean." The bureaucrat patted his stomach. "Just look at this paunch."

"Perhaps," Chu said judiciously, "you have some of the offplanet science powers one sees on television. Muscle implants and the like."

"Proscribed technology is proscribed technology. If we employed it, we'd be no better than criminals ourselves." The bureaucrat coughed and with sudden energy said, "Where shall we start?"

The liaison officer straightened with a jerk, like a puppet seized by its strings, immediately all business. "If it's all the same to you, sir, I'd like to learn first how much you know about Gregorian, what leads you have, and so on. Then I can make my own report."

"He's a very charming man, to begin with," the bureaucrat said. "Everyone I've spoken with agrees on that. A native Mirandan, born somewhere in the Tidewater. His background is a bit murky. He worked for some years in the bioscience labs in the Outer Circle. Good work, as

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I understand it, but nothing exceptional. Then about a month ago he quit, and returned to Miranda. He's set himself up as some kind of bush wizard, I understand. A witch doctor or something, you doubtless have more information on that than I do. But shortly after he left, it was discovered that he may have misappropriated a substantial item of proscribed technology. That's when Technology Transfer got involved."

"That's not supposed to be possible." Chu smiled mockingly. "Tech Transfer's embargo is supposed to be absolute."

"It happens."

"What was stolen?"

"Sorry."

"That important, eh?" Chu made a thoughtful, clicking noise with his tongue. "Well, what do we know about the man himself?"

"Surprisingly little. His likeness, of course, geneprint, a scattering of standard clearance profiles. Interviews with a few acquaintances. He seems to have had no real friends, and he never discussed his past. In retrospect it seems clear he'd been keeping his record as uncluttered as possible. He must have been planning the theft for years."

"Do you have a dossier on him?"

"A copy of Gregorian's dossier," the bureaucrat said. He opened the briefcase, removed the item, gave it a little shake.

Chu craned curiously. "What else have you got in there?"

"Nothing," the bureaucrat said. He swiveled the briefcase to show it was empty, then handed over the dossier. It had been printed in the white lotus format currently popular in the high worlds, and folded into a handkerchief-sized square.

"Thank you." Chu held the dossier over his head and twisted his hand. The square of paper disappeared. He turned his hand back and forth to demonstrate that it was empty.

The bureaucrat smiled. "Do that again."

"Oh, the first rule of magic is never do the same trick twice in a row. The audience knows what to expect." His eyes glittered insolently. "But if I might show you one thing more?"

"Is it relevant?"

Chu shrugged. "It's instructive, anyway."

"Oh, go ahead," the bureaucrat said. "As long as it doesn't take too long."

Chu opened a cage and lifted out a rainbird. "Thank you." With a gesture, he dimmed the windows, suffusing the lounge with twilight. "I open my act with this illusion. Thusly:"

He bowed deeply and swept out a hand. His movements were all jerky, distinct, artificial. "Welcome, dear friends, countrymen, and offworlders. It is my duty and pleasure today to entertain and enlighten you with legerdemain and scientific patter." He cocked an eyebrow. "Then I go into a little rant about the mutability of life here, and its myriad forms of adaptation to the jubilee tides. Where Terran flora and fauna—most particularly including ourselves—cannot face the return of Ocean, to the

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native biota the tides are merely a passing and regular event. Evolution, endless eons of periodic flooding, blah blah blah. Sometimes I compare Nature to a magician—myself by implication—working changes on a handful of tricks. All of which leads in to the observation that much of the animal life here is dimorphic, which means simply that it has two distinct forms, depending on which season of the great year is in effect.

"Then I demonstrate." He held the rainbird perched on his forefinger, gently stroking its head. The long tailfeathers hung down like teardrops. "The rainbird is a typical shapeshifter. When the living change comes over the Tidewater, when Ocean rises to drown half of Continent, it adapts by transforming into a more appropriate configuration." Suddenly he plunged both hands deep into the bowl of water. The bird struggled wildly, and disappeared in a swirl of bubbles and sand.

The illusionist lifted his hands from the water. The bureaucrat noted that he had not so much as gotten his sleeves wet.

When the water cleared, a multicolored fish was swimming in great agitation in the water, long fins trailing behind. "Behold!" Chu cried. "The sparrowfish—in great summer morph an aviform, and a pisciform for the great winter. One of the marvelous tricks that Nature here plays."

The bureaucrat applauded. "Very neatly done," he said with only slight irony.

"I also do tricks with a jar of liquid helium. Shattering roses and the like."

"I doubt that will be necessary. You said there was a point to your demonstration?"

"Absolutely." The illusionist's eyes glittered. "It's this: Gregorian is going to be a very difficult man to catch. He's a magician, you see, and native to the Tidewater. He can change his own form, or that of his enemy, whichever he pleases. He can kill with a thought. More importantly, he understands the land here and you don't. He can tap its power and use it against you."

"You don't actually believe that Gregorian is a magician? That he has supernatural powers, I mean."

"Implicitly."

In the face of that fanatical certainty, the bureaucrat did not know what to say. "Ahem. Yes. Thank you for your concern. Now, what say we get down to business?"

"Oh yes, sir, immediately, sir." The young man touched a pocket, and then another. His expression changed, grew pained. In an embarrassed voice he said, "Ah . . . I'm afraid I left my materials in the forward stowage. If you would wait?"

"Of course." The bureaucrat tried not to be pleased by the young man's obvious discomfort.

With Chu gone, the bureaucrat returned to his contemplation of the passing forest below. The airship soared and curved, dipped its nose and sank low in the air. The bureaucrat remembered his first sighting of it back in Port Richmond, angling in for a docking. Complex with flukes,

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elevators and lifting planes, the great airship somehow transcended the antique awkwardness of its design. It descended slowly, gracefully, rotor blades thundering. Barnacles covered its underbelly, and mooring ropes hung from its jaws like strings of kelp.

A few minutes later the *Leviathan* docked at a heliostat tower at the edge of a dusty little river town. A lone figure in crisp white climbed the rope ladder, and then the heliostat cast off again. Nobody debarked.

The lounge door opened and a slim woman in the uniform of internal security entered. She strode forward, hand extended, to offer her credentials. "Lieutenant-Liaison Emilie Chu," she said. Then, "Sir? Are you quite all right?"

Two: WITCH CULTS OF WHITEMARSH

Gregorian kissed the old woman and threw her from the cliff. She fell toward the cold grey water headfirst, twisting. There was a small white splash as she hit, plunging deep beneath the chop. She did not surface. A little distance away, something dark and sleek as an otter broke water, dove and disappeared.

"It's a trick," the real Lieutenant Chu said. On the screen Gregorian's face appeared: heavy, mature, confident. His lips moved soundlessly. Be all that you were meant to be. The bureaucrat had killed the sound after the fifth repetition, but he knew the words by heart. Give up your weaknesses. Dare to live forever. The commercial ended, skipped to the beginning and began again.

"A trick? How so?"

"A bird cannot change into a fish in an instant. That kind of adaptation takes time." Lieutenant Chu rolled up her sleeve and reached into the fishbowl. The sparrowfish jerked away, bright fins swirling. Dark sand puffed up, obscuring the tank for an instant. "The sparrowfish is a burrower. It was in the sand when he thrust the rainbird into the water. One quick movement, like this," she demonstrated, "and the bird is strangled. Plunge it into the dirt and simultaneously the fish is startled into swimming."

She set the small corpse down on the table. "Simple, when you know how it's done."

Gregorian kissed the old woman and threw her from the cliff. She fell toward the cold grey water headfirst, twisting. There was a small white splash as she hit, plunging deep beneath the chop. She did not surface. A little distance away, something dark and sleek as an otter broke water, dove and disappeared.

The bureaucrat snapped off the television.

The government liaison leaned straight-backed against a window, the creases of her uniform imperially crisp, smoking a thin black cigarello. Emilie Chu was thin herself, a whippet of a woman, with cynical eyes and the perpetual hint of a sneer to her lips. "No word from Bergier. It

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appears my impersonator has escaped." She stroked her almost-invisible mustache with cool amusement.

"We don't know that he's gone yet," the bureaucrat reminded her. The windows were clear now and in the fresh, bright air, the encounter with the false Chu seemed unlikely, the stuff of travelers' tales. "Let's go see the commander."

The rear observatory was filled with uniformed schoolgirls on a day trip from the Laserfield Academy, who nudged each other and giggled as the bureaucrat followed Chu up an access ladder and through a hatch into the interior of the gas bag. The hatch closed and the bureaucrat stood within the triangular strutting of the keel. It was dark between the looming gas cells, and a thin line of overhead lights provided more a sense of dimension than illumination. A crewman dropped to the walkway before them. "Passengers are not—" She saw Chu's uniform and stiffened.

"Commander-Pilot Bergier, please," the bureaucrat said.

"You want to see the commander?" She stared, as if he were a sphinx materialized from nothing to confront her with a particularly outrageous riddle.

"If it isn't too much trouble," Chu said with quiet menace.

The woman spun on her heel. She led them through the gullet of the airship to the prow where stairs so steep they had to be climbed on all fours like a ladder rose to the pilothouse. On the dark wooden door was the faintest gleam of elfinbone inlay forming a large, pale rose-and-phallus design. The crewman gave three quick raps, and then seized a strut and swung up into the shadows, as agile as any monkey. A deep voice rumbled, "Enter."

They opened the door and stepped within.

The pilothouse was small. Its windshield was shuttered, leaving it lit only by a triad of navigation screens to the fore. It had a lived-in smell, of body sweat and stale clothing. Commander Bergier stood hunched over the screens, looking like an aging eagle, his face a pale beak, suddenly noble when he raised his chin, a scrawny-bearded poet brooding over the bright terrain of his world. Turning, he raised eyes fixed on some distant tragedy more compelling than present danger could ever be. Two dark cuplines curved under each eye. "Yes?" he said.

Lieutenant Chu saluted crisply and the bureaucrat, remembering in time that all airship commanders held parallel commissions in internal security, offered his credentials. Bergier glanced down at them, handed them back. "Not everyone welcomes your sort on our planet, sir," the commander said. "You keep us in poverty, you live off our labor, you exploit our resources and you pay us with nothing but condescension."

The bureaucrat blinked, astonished. Before he could frame a response, the commander continued. "However, I am an officer and I understand my duty." He popped a lozenge into his mouth and sucked noisily. A rotten-sweet smell filled the cabin. "Make your demands."

"I'm not making any demands," the bureaucrat began. "I only—"

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"There speaks the voice of power. You maintain a stranglehold on the technology that could turn Miranda into an earthly paradise. You control manufacturing processes that allow you to undercut our economy at will. We exist at your whim and sufferance and in the form you think good. Then you walk in here carrying this whip and making demands you doubtless prefer to call requests and pretend it is for our own good. Let us not cap this peformance with hypocrisy, sir."

"Technology didn't exactly make an 'earthly paradise' of Earth. Or don't they teach classical history here?"

"The perfect display of arrogance. You deny us our material heritage and now you have as good as asked me to thank you for it. Well, sir, I will not. I have my pride. And I—" He paused. In the sudden silence it was observable how his head nodded slightly at irregular intervals, as if he fought off sleep. His mouth opened and shut, opened and shut again. His eyes slid slowly to the side in search of his lost thought. "And, ah. And, ah—"

"The illusionist," the bureaucrat insisted. "Lieutenant Chu's impersonator. Have you found him yet?"

Bergier straightened, his fire and granite resorted. "No, sir, we have not. We have not found him for he is not here to be found. He has left the ship."

"That's not possible. You docked once, and nobody debarked. I was watching."

"This is a seaward flight. It is all but empty. On the landward run, yes, perhaps an agile and determined man could evade me. But I have accounted for every passenger and had my crew open every stowage compartment and equipment niche in the *Leviathan*. I went so far as to send an engineer with an airpack up the gas vents. Your man is not here."

"It's only logical he'd've secured his escape beforehand. Maybe he had a collapsible glider hidden forward," Chu suggested. "It wouldn't have been difficult for an athletic man. He could have just opened a window and slipped away."

More likely, the bureaucrat thought, and the thought struck him with the force of inevitability, more likely he had simply bribed the captain to lie for him. That was how he himself would've arranged it. To cover his suspicion he said, "What bothers me is why Gregorian went to all this trouble to find out how much we know about him. It hardly seems worth his effort."

Bergier scowled at his screens, said nothing. He touched a control, and the timbre of one engine changed, grew deeper. Slowly, slowly the ship began to turn.

"He was just baiting you," Chu said. "Nothing more complicated than that."

"Is that likely?" the bureaucrat said dubiously.

"Magicians are capable of anything. Their thinking isn't easy to follow.

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Hey! Maybe that was Gregorian himself? He was wearing gloves, after all."

"Pictures of Gregorian and of our impersonator," the bureaucrat said. "Front and side both." He removed them from his briefcase, shook off the moisture, laid them side by side beside the screens. "No, look at that—it's absurd to even contemplate. What does his wearing gloves have to do with anything?"

Chu carefully compared the tall, beefy figure of Gregorian with the slight figure of her impersonator. "No," she agreed. "Just look at those faces." Gregorian had a dark, animal power, even in the picture. He looked more minotaur than man, so strong-jawed and heavy-browed that he passed through mere homeliness into something profound. His was the sort of face that would seem ugly in repose, then waken to beauty at the twitch of a grin, the slow wink of one eye. It could never have been hidden in the pink roundness of the false Chu's face.

"Our intruder wore gloves because he was a magician." Lieutenant Chu wriggled her fingers. "Magicians tattoo their hands, one marking for each piece of lore they master, starting from the middle finger and moving up the wrist. A magus will have 'em up to the elbows. Snakes and moons and whatnot. If you'd seen his hands, you'd never have mistaken him for a Piedmont official."

Bergier cleared his throat and, when they both turned to him, said, "With the technology you deny us, a single man could operate this ship. Alone, he could manage all functions from baggage to public relations with nary a crewman under him."

"That same technology would make your job superfluous," the bureaucrat pointed out. "Do you think for an instant that your government would pay for an expensive luxury like this airship if they could have a fleet of fast, cheap, atmosphere-destroying shuttles?"

"Tyranny always has its rationale."

Before the bureaucrat could respond, Chu interjected, "We've located Gregorian's mother."

"Have we?"

"Yes." Chu grinned so cockily the bureaucrat realized this must be something she had dug up on her own initiative. "She lives in a river town just below Lightfoot. There's no heliostat station there, but if we can't find somebody to rent us a boat, it's not a long walk. That'll be the best place to start our investigation. After that we'll tackle the television spots, see if we can trace the money. All television is broadcast from the Piedmont, but if you want to follow up on the ads, there's a gate at the heliostat station, that's no problem."

"We'll visit the mother first thing tomorrow morning," the bureaucrat said. "But I've dealt with planetside banks before, and I very seriously doubt we'll be able to follow the money."

Bergier looked at him scornfully. "Money can always be traced. It leaves a trail of slime behind it wherever it goes."

The bureaucrat smiled, unconvinced. "That's very aphoristic."

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"Don't you dare laugh at me! I had five wives in the Tidewater when I was younger." Bergier popped another lozenge, mouthed it liquidly. "I had them placed where they could do the most good, spaced out along my route distant enough that not one suspected the existence of the others." The bureaucrat saw that the commander did not observe how Chu rolled her eyes when he said this. "But then I discovered that my Ysolt was unfaithful. It drove me half mad with jealousy. That was not long after the witch cults were put down. I returned to her that day after an absence of weeks. Oh, she was hot. Her period had just begun. The whole house smelled of her." His nostrils flared. "You have no idea what she was like at such times. I walked in the door and she slammed me to the floor and ripped open my uniform. She was naked. It was like being raped by a whirlwind. All I could think was that we must avoid scandalizing the neighbors.

"It would have made a fish laugh to see me struggling beneath that little hellcat, I should imagine. Red-faced, half undressed, and flailing out with one arm to close the door.

"Well and good. I was a young man. But the things she did to me! From somewhere she had acquired skills I had not taught her, ideas that were not mine. Some of them things such as I had never experienced. We had been married for years. Now all at once, she had acquired new tastes. Where had she learned them, hey? Where?"

"Maybe she read a book," Chu said dryly.

"Bah! She had a lover! It was obvious. She was not a subtle woman, Ysolt. She was like a child, showing off a new toy. Why don't we see what happens if, she said . . . Let's pretend you're the woman and I'm the man . . . This time I'm not going to move at all and you can . . . It took her hours to demonstrate everything she had learned—'thought of,' she said—and I had a lot of time to mull over what I should do.

"It was dark when I left her. She was sleeping it off, her long black hair sticking to her sweaty little breasts. What an angelic smile she had! I went out to discover who had cuckolded me, and I brought along a gun. He would not be difficult to find, I determined. A man with such skill as Ysolt mirrored would be known in the right quarters.

"I went down to the riverbank, to the jugs and paintpots, and asked a few questions. They said yes, a man with the kind of skill I described had been through recently." A hidden speaker mumbled respectfully, and Bergier touched the controls. "Trim the port aerostat manually if you have to. Yes. No. You have your orders." He was silent for a long, forlorn moment, and the bureaucrat thought he had lost the thread of his tale. But then he began again.

"But I could not find the man. Everyone had heard of him—word had gone round like the latest dirty joke—and many hinted they had slept with him, but he was not to be found. There were a lot of odd types afoot in those days, after the suppression of Whitemarsh, and a sex-artist was the least of them. I learned that he was of moderate size, polite dress, wry humor. That he spoke little, lived off the largesse of women, had

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dark eyes, rarely blinked. But the river lands swarmed with people who had something to hide. A cautious man could hide there forever, and he was the most evasive creature in the world. He moved unseen and unnoted through the night world, made no promises, had no friends, established no rhythms. It was like punching empty air! He was not to be found.

"After a few days, I changed my tactics. I decided Ysolt should find him for me. So I made myself impotent. You understand how? With my fist. Old Mother Hand and her five daughters. By the time Ysolt got to me there was nothing could make the old soldier stand erect for her. It drove her to distraction. And I, of course, feigned embarrassment, humiliation, distress. After a time I simply refused to try.

"Sure enough she was driven back to her lover, to this man of extraordinary skill and knowledge. She returned to me with breathing exercises and relaxation techniques that ought to have worked, but did not. All this time, I acted cold and distant toward her. It was only natural she would assume that I was blaming her for my disability. By the time the corps called me back to duty, she was ready to do anything to effect my cure.

"When next I returned, she had 'discovered' a man who could aid me in my distress. She knew I didn't approve of the witch cultists. But he could prepare a potion for me. It would cost a great deal. She did not like that part. A man should not charge for such a thing. But a husband's happiness was so important to his wife. . . . She finally persuaded me.

"That night I filled a small, heavy box with silver and went as directed to a small garage just below the docks. There was a blue light over the side door. I went in.

"The minute the door closed, someone threw on every light in the place. My eyes crawled. Then the bright sting of vision resolved into automobiles, racks of grease guns, welding tanks. There were six waiting for me, two of them women. They sat in truck cabs and atop hoods, looking at me with unfriendly eyes, as unblinking as owls."

The speaker murmured again and Bergier jerked his head to the side. "Why are you bothering me with this? I don't want to be disturbed with routine." Then, returning to his story, "One of the women asked to see my money. I opened my box, took out a moleskin bag containing eighty *fleur-de-vie* dollars, and threw it at her feet. She untied the bag, saw the flash of mint silver, and drew in her breath. This came from Whitemarsh, she said.

"I said nothing.

"The cultists traded glances. I slid a hand inside my coat and clutched my revolver. We need the money, a man said. The government dogs are slavering over our shoulders. I can smell their filthy breath.

"The woman held up a handful of silver, flashing like so many mirrors. There was a coinmaker disappeared just before the rape of Whitemarsh, she said. They took his stock and gave it away to whoever wanted it. I

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was there, but felt I didn't need it. She shrugged. How quickly things change.

"I knew they thought I'd robbed a brother fugitive. I don't suppose you know much about the suppression of Whitemarsh?"

"No," the bureaucrat said.

"Only hearsay," Chu said. "It's not exactly the sort of history they teach in school."

"They should," the commander said. "Let the children know what government is all about. This was back when the Tidewater was young, and communes and utopian communities were as common as mushrooms. Harmless most of them were, pallid things here and gone in a month. But the Whitemarsh cults were different; they spread like marsh-fire. Men and women went naked in public daylight. They would not eat meat. They participated in ritual orgies. They refused to serve in the militia. Factories closed for want of laborers. Crops went unharvested. Children were not properly schooled. Private citizens minted their own coinage. They had no leaders. They paid no taxes. No government would have tolerated it.

"We fell on them with fire and steel. In a single day we destroyed the cults, drove the survivors into hiding and showed them such horror they would never dare rise again. So you understand that I was in great danger. But I did not show fear. I asked them, did they want the money or not?

"One of the men took the bag, weighed it in his hand. Then, as I had hoped, he slid a handful of coins into each of his trousers pockets. We will divide this evenly, he said. So long as the spirit is alive, Whitemarsh is not dead. He threw me a greasy bundle of herbs, and said sneeringly, This would make a corpse rise, much less your limp little self.

"I dropped the bundle in my lead box and left. At home I beat Ysolt until she bled and threw her out in the street. I waited a week and then reported to internal security that fugitive cultists were hiding in my area. They ran a scan and found the coins, and with the coins the cultists. I still did not know which specific one had defiled my Ysolt, but they all still held most of the coins so he had been punished. Oh yes, he had been punished well."

After a moment's silence, the bureaucrat said, "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"I was sent into Whitemarsh just before it fell. I removed the coinmaker, and used a device my superiors had provided to irradiate his stock. Half of those who escaped our wrath carried their debased coinage with them. They never understood how we found them so easily. But it is observed that many of the men came down with radiation poisoning not long after, and where a man least wishes it. Disgusting sight. I still have the pictures." He stuck his hands in his trousers pockets and raised his eyebrows. "I fed the potion they gave me to Ysolt's dog, and it died. So much for the subtlety of wizards."

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"The irradiator is illegal," the bureaucrat said. "Even planetary government is not allowed to use one. It can do a lot of damage."

"You see your duty, O hound of the people! Go to it. The trail is only sixty years cold." Bergier stared bitterly down at his screens. "I look down at the land, and I see my life mapped out beneath me. We're coming up on Ysolt's Betrayal which is sometimes called Cuckold, and further on is Penelope's Lapse, then Feverdeath, and Abandonment. At the end of the run is Cape Disillusion and that accounts for all my wives. I have retreated from the land, but I cannot yet completely leave it. I keep waiting. I keep waiting. For what? Perhaps for daybreak."

Bergier threw open the shutters. The bureaucrat winced as bright white light flooded in, drowning them all in glory, turning the commander pale and old, the flesh hanging loose on his cheeks. Down below they saw the roofs and towers, spires and one gold dome of Lightfoot rising toward them, bristling with antennae.

"I am the maggot in the skull," Bergier said deliberately, "writhing in darkness." The illogic of the remark, and its suddenness, jolted the bureaucrat, and in a shiver of insight he realized that those staring eyes were looking not back at horror but forward. There was a premonition of senility in that slow speech, as if the old commander were staring ahead into a protracted slide into toothless misery and a death no more distinct from life than that line dividing ocean from sky.

As they started from the cabin, the commander said, "Lieutenant Chu, I will expect you to keep me posted. I will be following your progress closely."

"Sir." Chu closed the door, and they descended the stairs. She laughed lightly. "Did you notice the lozenges?" The bureaucrat grunted. "Swamp witch nostrums, supposed to be good for impotence. They're made out of roots and bull's jizm and all sorts of nasty stuff. No fool like an old fool," she said. "He never leaves that little cabin, you know. He's famous for it. He even sleeps there."

The bureaucrat wasn't listening. "He's around here somewhere." He peered into the darkness, holding his breath, but heard nothing. "Hiding."

"Who?"

"Your impersonator. The young daredevil." To his briefcase he said, "Reconstruct his gene trace and build me a locater. That'll sniff him out."

"That's proscribed technology," the briefcase said. "I'm not allowed to manufacture it on a planetary surface."

"Damn!"

The air within the envelope was still, but filled with tension. It thrummed with the vibrations of the engines, as alive as a coiled snake. The bureaucrat could feel the false Chu peering at them from the shadows. Laughing.

Chu put a hand on his arm. "Don't." Her eyes were serious. "If you get emotionally involved with the opposition, they've got you by the balls. Cool off. Maintain your detachment."

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"I don't—"

"—need to take advice from the likes of me. I know." She grinned cockily, the swaggering cynic again. "The planetary forces are all corrupt and ineffectual, we're famous for it. Even so, I'm worth listening to. This is my territory. I know the people we're up against."

"Watch yourself, buddy!"

The bureaucrat stepped back as four men hoisted a timber up out of the mud and wrestled it onto a flatbed truck. A chunky woman with red hair stood on the truckbed, working the hoist. The buildings here were as tumbledown a lot as he'd ever seen, unpainted, windows cracked, shingles missing. Crusted masses of barnacles covered their north sides.

The ground felt soft underfoot. The bureaucrat looked mournfully down at his shoes. He was standing in the mud. "What's going on?" he asked.

A withered old shopkeeper, all but lost in the folds of his clothes, as if he had shrunk or they grown, sat watching from his porch. A silver skull dangled from his left ear, marking him as a former space marine, and a ruby pierced through one nostril made him a veteran of the Third Unification. "Ripping out the sidewalks," he said glumly. "Genuine sea-oak, and it's been aging in the ground for most of a century. My grandaddy laid it down back when the Tidewater was young. Cheap as dirt then, but a year from now I can name my price."

"How do I go about renting a boat?"

"Well, I'll tell you plain, I don't see how you can. Not that many boats around now that the docks have been tore out." He smiled sourly at the bureaucrat's expression. "They were sea-oak too. Tore 'em out last month, when the railroad went away."

The bureaucrat glanced uneasily at the *Leviathan*, dwindling low in the eastern sky. A swarm of midges, either vampire gnats or else barnacle flies, hovered nearby threatening to attack, and then shrank to invisibility as they drew away. The flies, airship, railroad, docks, and walks, all of Lightfoot seemed to be receding from his touch, as if caught up by an all-encompassing ebbtide. Suddenly he felt dizzy, drawn into an airless space where his inner ear spun wildly, and there was no ground underfoot.

With a shout the timber was slammed onto the flatbed. The woman handling the crane joked and chatted with the men in the mud. "You gotta see my fantasia, though. You'll die when you see it. It's cut right down to here."

"Gonna show off the top of your tits, eh, Bea?" one of the men said.

She shook her head scornfully. "Halfway down the nipples. You're going to see parts of me you never suspected existed."

"Oh I suspected something all right. I just never felt called on to do anything in particular about them."

"Well, you come to the jubilee in Rose Hall tomorrow night and you can eat your heart out."

"Oh, is *that* what you want me to eat out?" He grinned wryly, then

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danced back as the beam slipped a few inches in its harness. "Watch that side there! A little remark like that don't deserve to get my toes crushed."

"Don't you worry. It's not your toes I'm thinking of crushing."

"Excuse me," the bureaucrat called up. "Is there any chance I can rent your truck? Are you the owner?"

The redheaded woman looked down at him. "Yeah, I'm the owner," she said. "You don't want to rent this thing, though. See, I'm running it from a battery rated for a rig twice this size, so I gotta step down the voltage, okay? Only the transformer's going. I can get maybe a half hour out of it before it overheats and starts to melt the insulation. I been kind of nursing it along. Now Anatole's got a spare transformer, but he thinks he oughta be able to charge an arm and a leg for it. I been holding off. I figure it gets a little closer to jubilee, he'll take what he can get."

"Aniobe, I keep telling you," the shopkeeper said. "I could buy that sucker off him for half what—"

She tossed her head. "Oh, shut up, Pouffe. Don't you go spoiling my fun!"

The bureaucrat cleared his throat. "I don't want to go far. Just down the river a way and back again." A barnacle fly stung his arm and he swatted it.

"Naw, the wheel bearings are starting to seize up too. Onliest place to get lubricant nowadays is Gireaux's and old Gireaux has got a bad case of the touchy-feelies. Always trying to get a little kiss or something. If I wanted to get a tub of grease out of him on short notice, I'd probably have to get down on my knees and give him a sleeve job!"

The men grinned like hounds. Pouffe, however, shook his head and sighed. "I'm going to miss all this," he said heavily. The bureaucrat noticed for the first time the deep-interface jacks on his wrists, grey with corrosion; he'd served time on Caliban in his day. The man must have an interesting history behind him. "All your friends say they'll keep in touch after they move to the Piedmont, but it's just not going to happen. Who are they kidding?"

"Oh, come off it," Aniobe scoffed. "Any man as rich as you will have friends wherever he goes. It's not as if you needed to have a personality or nothing."

The last timber loaded, Aniobe shut down the truck and shipped the winch. The laborers waited to be dismissed. One, a roosterish young man with a comb of stiff black hair, wandered onto the porch and casually leaned over a tray of brightly bundled feathers—fetishes, perhaps, or fishing lures. Chu watched him carefully.

He was straightening from the tray when Chu stepped forward and seized his arm.

"I saw that!" Chu spun the man around and slammed him up against the doorpost. He stared at her, face blank with shock. "What have you got in that shirt?"

"I—Nothing! W-what are—" he stammered. Aniobe stood up straight,

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putting hands on hips. The other laborers, the bureaucrat, the shopkeeper, all froze motionless and silent, watching the confrontation.

"Take it off!" Chu barked. "Now!"

Stunned and fearful, he obeyed. He held the shirt forward in one hand to show there was nothing hidden there.

Chu ignored it. She looked slowly up and down the young man's torso. It was lean and muscular, with a long silvery scar curving across his abdomen, and a dark cluster of curly hair on his chest. She smiled.

"Nice," she said.

The laborers, their boss, and the shopkeeper roared with laughter. Chu's victim reddened, lowered his head angrily, bunched his fists, and did nothing.

"You notice the way that redhead was teasing those men?" Chu remarked as they walked away. "Provocative little bitch." Far down the street was a weary-looking building, its ridgeline sagging, half its windows boarded over with old advertising placards cut to size. The wood was dark with rot, fragmented words and images opening small portals into a brighter world: ZAR, a fishtail, what was either a breast or a knee, KLE, and a nose pointed straight up as if its owner hoped to catch rain in the nostrils. A faded sign over the main door read TERMINAL HOTEL. The torn-up remains of the railbed ran beside it. "My husband's the same way."

"Why did you do that to him?" the bureaucrat asked. "That worker."

Chu didn't pretend not to understand. "Oh, I have plans for that young man. He's going to have a few beers now, and try to forget what happened, but of course his friends won't let him. By the time I've checked into my room, sent for my baggage, and freshened up, he'll be a little drunk. I'll go look him up then. He sees me, and he's going to feel a little hot and a little uncertain and a little embarrassed. He'll look at me and he won't know what he feels.

"Then I'll give him the opportunity to sort his feelings out."

"Your method strikes me as being a little, um, uncertain. As far as effectiveness goes."

"Trust me," Chu said. "I've done this before."

"Aha," the bureaucrat said vaguely. Then, "Why don't you go ahead and book us rooms, while I see about Gregorian's mother?"

"I thought you weren't going to interview her until morning."

"Wasn't I?" The bureaucrat detoured around a rotting pile of truck tires. He had very deliberately dropped that scrap of information in front of Bergier. He didn't trust the man. He thought it all too possible that Bergier might arrange for a messenger sometime in the night to warn the mother against speaking to him.

It was part and parcel of a more serious puzzle, the question of where the false Chu had gotten his information. He'd known not only what name to give, but to leave the airship just before the real Chu boarded.

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More significantly, he knew that the bureaucrat hadn't been told his liaison was a woman.

Someone in his chain of command, either within the planetary government or Technology Transfer itself, was working with Gregorian. And while it need not be Bergier, the commander was as good a suspect as any.

"I changed my mind," he said.

Three: THE DANCE OF THE INHERITORS

Sunset. Bold Prospero was a pirate galleon sailing toward the night. It touched the horizon, flattening into an oval as it set continents of clouds afire. Under the trees the shadows were fading into blue air. The bureaucrat trudged down the river road, passing his briefcase from hand to hand as its weight made his palms and fingers ache.

At the edge of the village, three ragged men had built a fire in the road and were roasting yams in its coals. A dark giant sat soaking broadleaves in a bowl of water, and wrapping them about the tubers. A grey, lank man stuck them in the fire and their aged companion raked the coals back. Two television sets were wedged in the sand, one with the sound off, and the other turned away, queasily imaging at an empty trail. "Soft evening," the bureaucrat said.

"Same to you," the lank, colorless man said. Bony knees showed through holes in his trousers. "Have a sit-down." He hitched slightly to the side, and the bureaucrat hunkered down beside him, resting on the balls of his feet, careful not to soil his white trousers. On the pale screen, a young man stared moodily out a window at the crashing sea. A woman stood at his back, hands on his shoulders. "Old man doesn't believe he's seeing a mermaid," the lank man said.

"Well, that's the way fathers are." Soft blue smoke wisped into the darkening sky, smelling of driftwood and cedarbloom. "You lads out hunting?"

"In a manner of speaking," the lank one said. The giant snorted.

"We're scavengers," the old man said harshly. "If that's not good enough for you, then say so now and fuck off." They all stared at him, unblinking.

In the sudden silence, the bureaucrat could hear the show he'd interrupted. *Byron, come away from that window. There's nothing out there but cold and changing Ocean. Go into the air. Your father thinks—*

My father thinks of nothing but money.

"I've got a bottle of vacuum-distilled brandy in my briefcase." He fetched the bottle, took a swig, held it out. "If I could convince you . . ."

"Well, that is hospitable." The flask went around twice, and then Lank said, "You must be heading into the village."

"Yes, to see Mother Gregorian. Perhaps you know her house."

The three exchanged glances. "You won't get anything out of her,"

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Lank said. "The villagers tell stories about her, you know. She's a type." He nodded toward the television. "Ought to be on the show."

"Tell me about her."

"Naw, I don't think so." He raised a sticklike arm, pointed. "The road descends into the first street to the waterfront. Go down to the river, to the fifth—"

"Sixth," the old man said.

"Sixth street after that. Go up by the kirk and past the boneyard to the end, right by the marshes. Can't miss it. Big fucking castle of a place."

"Thanks." He stood.

They were no longer looking at him. On the screen, an albino girlchild was standing alone in the middle of a raging argument. She was an island of serene calm, her eyes vacant and autistic. "That's Eden, she's the boy's sister. Hasn't spoken since it happened," Lank remarked.

"What happened?"

"She saw a unicorn," the giant said.

From the air, the village had looked like a very simple antique printed circuit, of the sort Galileo might have used to build his first radio telescope, if he wasn't confusing two different eras, a comb of crooked lines leading inward from the water, too small for there to be any need of cross-streets. The houses were small and shabby, but warm light spilled from the windows, and voices murmured within. An occasional dog stridently warned him away from boat or yard. Other than an innkeeper who nodded lazily from the door of the watermen's hotel, he met no one by the riverfront. He turned onto the marsh road, the river cold and silver at his back. He went past a walled-in ground where skeletons hung from the trees, the bones bleached and painted and wired together so that they clacked gently in an almost unnoticeable breeze.

Beyond the boneyard, the ground rose gently. He passed several large dark houses, still unscavenged, newly abandoned by their wealthy owners. Probably gone to the Piedmont to participate in the economic boom. Last on the road, just before the land wearily eased itself down into marsh, was his destination.

The house was blistered and barnacled, and it was meager light indeed that escaped the thickly curtained windows into the wider world. But under its mottling of chrysalids the wood planking was gracefully carved and fitted. He stood before the massive entranceway and touched the doorplate. Within, a voice gonged, "Callers, mistresses." Then, to him, the door said, "Please wait."

A moment later the door opened on a pale, thin face. On seeing him, it opened in startlement, revealing an instant's fear before tightening again into wariness. The woman lifted her chin defiantly, so that her eyes seemed simultaneously to flinch away from him. "I thought you were the appraiser."

The bureaucrat smiled. "Mother Gregorian?"

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"Oh, her." She turned away. "I suppose you'd best come inside." He followed her down the gullet of a hallway flocked with a floral print gone dead brown into the crowded belly of a sitting room. She seated him in a dark lionfooted chair. It was a massy thing, shag-maned atop and fringed beneath, with padded armrests. He'd hate to have to move it.

A woman hurried into the room. "Is that the appraiser? Have him look at the crystal, I—" She stopped.

Tock. A metronome wedged between dusty specimen bells reached the end of its swing and began the long, slow return, ponderously counting out the slow seconds of mortality. Trophy beasts peered down at him from the tin ceiling with eyes of green and grey and orange glass. Now that he noticed, the room was full of faces. Heavy-lidded, openmouthed, and disapproving, they were carved into the legs, sides, and bases of the escritoires, tables, sideboards, and china cabinets that jostled one another competing for space. Even the blonde mahogany pieces had been extravagantly carved. He wondered where the shavings were now; they would not have been discarded. It was an enormously valuable room, and would have been twice as comfortable with half as much furniture. *Tock.* The metronome reasserted itself and still the women studied him, as if they would never speak again.

"Honestly, Ambrym, must I wait forever for you to introduce your friend?"

"He's not mine, he's mother's."

"All the more reason to show a little common courtesy." She thrust forward a hand and he stood so they could shake. "I'm Linogre Gregorian," she said. "Esme! Where are you?"

A third woman, dressed in mousy brown, appeared, drying her hands with a cloth towel. "If that's the appraiser, be sure he knows that Ambrym broke the—" She stopped. "I'm sorry, I didn't know you had a caller." She didn't leave, but stood there, watching.

"Don't be stupid, Esme, this gentleman is here to see mama. Fetch him a glass of beer."

"You don't have to—"

"The Gregorians have always kept a decent house," she said firmly. "Please, sit. The doctor is with mother now. But if you'll wait, I'm sure she'll want to see you, if only briefly. You must take care, however, not to excite mother, for she is extremely ill."

"She's dying," Ambrym said. "She won't let us take her to the Piedmont, where the good hospitals are. She's taken a notion into her head to stay in this decaying hovel to the bitter end. I think she's expecting to be washed away with the tides. Not that the evacuation authorities would allow that." A faraway look came into her eyes. "That will be the final indignity, to be removed as paupers."

"If you don't mind, Ambrym, I'm sure our visitor is not interested in our private sorrows." The bureaucrat did not miss the way Ambrym stepped back from her sister, nor the defiance with which she did so. "May I ask your business with our mother?"

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"Yes, certainly." Esme placed a delicate crystal beerglass in his hand. "Thank you." She set a saucer by his elbow, lacy porcelain that was faintly translucent even in the evening light. It was a fairy mist of crockery, delicate beyond belief. "I'm from the Division of Technology Transfer within the System government. We'd like to talk with your brother, but unfortunately when he left our employ, he didn't leave his forwarding address. Perhaps you—?" He let his voice trail off, and took a sip from his glass. It was lager, thin and almost tasteless.

"I'm sure we wouldn't know," Linogre began coolly.

But Ambrym snapped, "Are you his agent? He left home when he was a child. He's not entitled! We've worked all our lives, we've slaved—"

"Ambrym," her sister said meaningfully.

"I don't care. When I think of the years of work, the suffering, the shit she's put me through—!" She appealed directly to the bureaucrat. "Every morning I polish her riding boots, every morning for the last five years! I have to kneel on the floor before her, while she tells me she's thinking of leaving the best things to Linogre. It's not as if she were ever getting out of that bed again."

"Ambrym!"

They fell silent, eyeing one another. The metronome doled out six heavy ticks, and the bureaucrat thought, surely Hell must be like this. Finally Linogre prevailed, and her sister looked away. From the shadows, Esme said timidly, "Would you like another glass of beer?"

The bureaucrat held up his glass, all but untasted. "No, thank you." Esme reminded him of a mouse, small and nervous, hovering at the edges of light in hopes of some small crumb. And yet on Miranda the mice were dimorphic, like everything else. At the end of the great year they would swim out into the ocean and drown in great numbers, and the few survivors would transform into—he tried to remember—little amphibious creatures, like vestpocket seals. He wondered would she change, too, come the tides?

"Don't think I can't see how you suck up to her," Ambrym snapped angrily. "Miss Meek-and-harmless. I saw you hiding away the silver gravy boat."

"I was cleaning it!"

"In your room, uh-huh, sure."

Panicky little eyes. "Anyway, she said it was mine."

"When?" both sisters cried in outraged unison.

"Just yesterday. You can ask her."

"You remember—" Linogre glanced at the bureaucrat, and lowered her voice, half-turning her back to him. "You remember that mother said we were to divide the silver evenly, share and share alike. She's always said that."

"Is that why you took the sugar tongs?" Ambrym asked innocently.

"I never!"

"You did."

Listening intently, the bureaucrat put his glass down beside him. It

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landed a trifle harder than he'd intended, and he heard a faint *crack* of breaking china.

Sharp-eared Esme was the only sister to notice. With a quick warning shake of her head, she whisked away the broken fragments of saucer, and replaced them with another before anyone else had realized what had happened.

"The moment mother's estate is settled," Ambrym was saying, "I intend to leave the house and never return. As far as I'm concerned, without mother, there is no family, and I am not related to either of you."

"Ambrym!" Esme squeaked, horrified.

"This is a shameful way to talk, with mother dying just above us!" her elder sister cried.

"She won't die, not when she knows how happy that would make us. Spite will keep her alive," Ambrym said. Her siblings turned disapproving frowns on her, but did not disagree.

They came to an abrupt halt then, and there was about the group a satisfied air of fulfillment, as if they had just enacted a private drama for his benefit and were awaiting applause so they could link hands and take their bows. There, their collective attitude seemed to be saying, now you know all about us. It was a well-rehearsed scene, and he had no reason to doubt that no one who entered the house would be allowed to escape without witnessing some variant of it.

At that moment the doctor descended the stairs, and all three looked up expectantly. He solemnly shook his head at the sisters, and departed. It was an ambiguous gesture at best.

"Come." Linogre started up the stairs.

In a somber mood, he followed.

She led him into a chamber so dimly lit he was not sure of its exact dimensions. An enormous bed dominated the room. Bedcurtains hung from brass hooks set into the ceiling, a tapestry of some bright land where satyrs and astronauts, nymphs and goats frolicked. The edges were bordered with the constellations of old earth, wands, and orchids, and other symbols of generative magic. Age had faded the colors, and the browned fabric was torn by its own weary weight.

Within the bed, propped up on a billowing throne of pillows, lay a grotesquely fat woman. He was reminded inevitably of a termite queen, she was so vast and passively immobile. Her face was doughy white, her mouth a tiny gasp of pain. A ringed hand hovered over a board floating atop her swollen belly on which was arranged a circle of solitaire cards: stars, cups, queens, and knaves in solemn procession. A silent television flickered at her feet.

The bureaucrat introduced himself, and she nodded without looking up from her slow telling out of cards. "I am playing a game called Futility," she said, "are you familiar with it?"

"How does one win?"

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"You don't. You can only postpone losing. I've managed to keep this particular game going for years." She looked up at her daughter.

"Don't think I don't understand what you're talking about."

"All is pattern," she said. She had to pause ever so slightly between sentences to take in air. "Relationships between things shift and change constantly; there is no such thing as objective truth. There is only pattern, and the greater pattern within which the lesser patterns occur. I understand the greater pattern, and so I've learned to make the cards dance. But inevitably the game must someday end. There is a lot of life in how one tells the cards."

"Everyone knows. You're not very subtle about it. Even this gentleman beside you understands."

"Do you?" The mother looked directly at him for the first time, both she and her daughter awaiting his answer with interest.

The bureaucrat coughed into his hand. "I must have a few words in private with you, if I may, Mother Gregorian."

She favored Linogre with a cold look. "Leave."

As the daughter closed the door, her mother said loudly, "They want to put me away. They conspire against me, and think I don't notice. But I notice. I notice everything."

In the hallway, Linogre made an exasperated noise. Her footsteps descended the stairs.

"It's the only way to keep her from listening at the door," the old woman whispered. Then, louder, almost shouting, "But I'll stay here, I'll die here. In this bed." Quieter, conversationally, "This was my bridebed, you know. I had my first man here." On the ghostcandling television, he could see Byron staring out his window again. "It's a good bed. I've taken each of my husbands to it. Sometimes more than one at once. Three times it's been my childbed—four if you count the miscarriage. I intend to die in it. That's little enough to ask." She sighed, and pushed the tray of cards away. It swiveled into the wall. "What do you want of me?"

"Something very simple, I hope. I wish to speak with your son, but don't have his address, and I was hoping you'd know where he is now."

"I haven't heard from him since he ran away from me." A crafty look came on her face. "What's he done to you? Taken off with your money, I expect. He tried to run off with mine, but I was too clever for him. That's all that's worth anything in life, all that gives you any control."

"So far as I know, he hasn't done anything. I'm only going to ask him a few questions."

"A few questions," she said disbelievingly.

He did nothing to break their shared silence, but let it flower and bloom, content to discover when she would finally speak again. Finally Mother Gregorian frowned with annoyance and said, "What kind of questions?"

"There's a posssibility, nothing more, that some controlled technology may be missing. My agency wants me to ask your son whether he knows anything about it."

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"What'll you do to him when you catch him?"

"I am not going to catch him at anything," the bureaucrat said testily. "If he has the technology, I'll ask him to return it. That's all I can do. I don't have the authority to take any serious action." She smiled meanly, as if she'd just caught him out in a falsehood. "But if you don't mind telling me just a little about him? What he was like as a child?"

The old woman shrugged painfully. "He was a normal enough boy. Full of the devil. He used to love stories, I remember. Ghosts and haunts and knights and space pirates. The priest would tell little Aldebaran stories of the martyrs. I remember how he'd sit listening, eyes big, and tremble when they died. Now he's on the television, I saw one of his commercials just the other day." She fiddled with the control, fanning through the spectrum of stations without finding the ad and put it down again. It was an expensive set, sealed in orbit and guaranteed by his own department as unconvertible. "I was a virgin when he was born."

"I beg your pardon?" he said, startled.

"Ah, I *thought* that would draw your attention. It has the stench of offworld technology to it, doesn't it? Yes, but it was an ancient crime, when I was young and very, very beautiful. His father was an offworlder like yourself, very wealthy, and I was just a backwoods witch—a pharmacienne, what you'd call an herbalist."

Her pale, spotted eyelids half closed; she laid her head further back, gazing into the past. "He came down from the sky in a red enameled flying machine, on a dark night when Caliban and Ariel were both newborn—that's an important time for gathering the roots, your mandragon, epipopsy, and kiss-a-clown especially. He was an important man, he had that glitter about him, but after all these years I somehow cannot remember his face—only his boots, he had wonderful boots of fine red leather he told me came from stars away, nothing you could buy on Miranda even if you had the money." She sighed. "He wanted a motherless child, of his own genes and no others. I have no idea why. I could never wheedle that from him, for all the months we stayed together.

"We haggled up a price. He gave me money enough to buy all this—" she gestured with her chin to indicate all her cluttered domain—"and later, several husbands more to my liking than he. Then he carried me away in his batwinged machine to Ararat, far deep in the forests. That's the first city was ever built on Miranda. From the air it looked like a mountain, built up in terraces like a ziggurat, and all overgrown. I stayed there for all my pregnancy. Don't believe those who say that haunts live there. I had it to my own, all those stone buildings larger than anything this side of the Piedmont, nobody there but myself and the beasts. The father stayed with me when he could, but it was usually just me and my thoughts, wandering among those overgrown walls. They were green with mosses, trees growing out of windows, fields of wildflowers on every roof. Nobody to talk to! I tell you, I earned that money. Sometimes I cried."

Her eyes were soft and distant. "He spoke very fondly to me, as if I

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were his housepet, his soft cat, but he never once thought of me as a woman, I could tell. I was only a convenient womb to him, when you come down to it, there was that reserve to him.

"I broke my hymen with these two thumbs. I'd been trained as a midwife, of course, and knew my diet and exercises. When he brought me offworld food and medicines, I threw them away. It amused him when he found out, for by then he could see that I was healthy and his bastard safe. But I made my plans. He was away the week of the birth—I'd told him the wrong date—and I gave him the slip. I was young then, I took two days' rest and then I left Ararat. He thought I'd be lost, you see, that I could never find my way out. But I was born in the Tidewater, and he on some floating metal world, what did he know? I'd saved up supplies in secret, and I knew what plants I could eat, so food was never a problem. I followed the flow of streams, took the easy way around marshes, and eventually I ended up at Ocean. There was nowhere else I could have ended up at, given I was consistent. It wasn't a month before I had come here, and set workmen to building this house."

She laughed lightly, and the laugh caught in her throat, causing her to choke. Her face twisted and reddened, until the bureaucrat feared she might be in serious distress. Then she calmed somewhat and he poured her a glass of water from a nearby carafe. She took it without thanking him. "I fooled the bugger, all right. I bested him. I had his money safe in Piedmont banks, and his bastard with me, he never knew where to look, and he couldn't inquire openly. Probably never bothered. Probably thought I died out there. It's marshy around Ararat."

"That's a remarkable story," the bureaucrat said.

"You think I was in love with him. It's what anyone would think, but it's not so. He'd come and bought me with his offplanet money. He thought himself important, and me nothing compared to him, a convenience he could pick up and put down as he wished. And he was right, damn him, that's what made me mad. So I took his son from him, to teach him otherwise." She cackled. "Ah, the pranks I used to play!"

"Do you have any pictures of him?"

She lifted a hand, pointed to a wall where petty portraits and ancient photomechanicals vied for space. "That picture there, in the tortoise-shell frame, bring it here." He obeyed. "The woman, that tall goddess was me, believe it or not. The child is young Aldebaran."

He looked carefully. The woman was heavy and slatternly, but clearly proud of her solidity, her flesh: she'd've had her admirers. The child was a spooky thing, staring straight at him with eyes that were two dark circles. "This is a picture of a girl."

"No, that's Aldebaran. I dressed him like that, in skirts and flounces, for the first several years to hide him from his father, in case he came looking. Until he was seven. He turned willful then, nasty creature, and wouldn't wear his proper clothes. I had to give in, he walked out in the street buck naked. But I didn't give in easy. Three days he went bare before the priest came and said this could not be."

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"How did Aldebaran come to have an offworld education?"

She ignored the question. "I wanted a daughter, of course. Girls are so much more tractable. A girl would not have run off to find her father, the way he did." Abruptly, she commanded, "Put your hand under my bed. Pull out what you find there."

He reached into the vaginal shadows under the bedskirts, drew out a shallow trunk carved with half-human figures. Mother Gregorian rolled over, grunting with effort, to look. "Under that green silk—there ought to be a brown package. Yes. That. Unwrap it."

It was alarmingly easy to obey this monster, she was so sure of her commands. He held a battered notebook in his hand, a faded scrawl of sigils running across its cover.

"That belonged to Aldebaran. He lost it just before he ran away." Her smile hinted at stories untold. "Take it with you, perhaps it'll tell you something." She closed her eyes, let her face relax into a flaccid mask of pain. She was panting now, steadily as a dog in summer, but quieter.

"You've been very helpful," the bureaucrat said cautiously. He could sense the old woman about to name a price for information given.

"He thought he was so clever. He thought that if he went far away enough, he could escape me. He thought he could escape me!" Her eyes flickered open, glittered venomously. "When you find him, give him a message for me. Tell him that no matter how far you go, in miles or learning or time, you cannot escape your mother."

He could think of nothing to say. So instead, he bowed politely and turned to leave.

"Oh, and you needn't bother about the broken saucer. We have more, and it was an incomplete set anyway."

He smiled. "That's a good trick. How did you know that?"

She reached a hand up in the air, a gesture that managed to be both languid and laborious, like a drowning woman reaching for the water's surface, and tripped a switch beam. The lights went out, and the room was plunged in darkness, save for a snowflake of light on the ceiling. It was a rosette of small circles, like a festival cookie. He looked down, and there was a smaller rosette on the floor, and brighter.

Her voice came out of the darkness, gloating. "The hot air register. When it's open, I can hear every word in the room below. I heard the saucer crack, and Esme scuttling out into the pantry and back." She laughed at him. "Too straightforward for you, eh? You offworlders think yourselves so sophisticated. Something as simple as our ventilation system is beyond you."

In the room below, he met a dignified looking man with a dark moustache, holding a glass of the daughters' thin beer. His hair was slicked down Piedmont style. "You must be the appraiser," the bureaucrat said.

They shook hands. "Yes, I come here every few weeks, to draw up another schedule of prices. A year ago, these pieces were worth a fortune; now, shipping costs have gone up and they're not so valuable. Most will

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have to be left behind." The appraiser held up a battered sheaf of papers and sighed piously. "These are the figures, anyone can check them. There's no profit in it for me. The only reason I agree to come back so often is that there are so many beautiful things here, it would be a pity if they were lost to the tides."

Linogre and Ambrym stood nearby, and Esme out of sight. Yet he could feel her watchful from some dim recess, all tiny black beadglass eyes and quivering whiskers.

"Esme," Linogre said. "Please show mother's visitor to the door. We must see to her wardrobe."

The elder two sisters swept away in the wake of the appraiser. As soon as they were gone, Esme emerged from shadow. The bureaucrat glanced up at the air register and impulsively took her hand. He felt the sudden, urgent need to get her out of this poisonous atmosphere. To save something from disaster. "Listen to me: your mother has told me she's cut you out of her will," he said. "She's not willing you a thing. Leave this house tonight, child. Right now. I'll help carry your things. There's nothing here for you."

The girl's dusty-glass eyes took on a dull sheen of malice. "I want to see her die!" she spat. "She can keep her money, I just want to see her dead and never coming back!"

It was night when he left the house, but Caliban was high in the sky and full, Ariel low but gibbous and bright, so the river road was well lit, and the trees had ghostly pairs of shadows arcing away from each other. The tree stars had come down from their high perches and, faintly luminous, were rooting for mites in the humus.

The walk was peaceful, and the bureaucrat used it to sort out his impressions. It seemed to him that the house he'd just left was frozen in time. When the tides come everything will change. Only some have rendered themselves beyond change, and caught by the sun, will be revealed as lifeless stone.

It wouldn't hurt to find out who the magician's father was. Even given that he'd doubtless broken tariff when he brought his money planetside, he must've been a rich and quite likely influential man. He thought again of the three sisters, unaged and unsexed by greed and inertia.

I could almost like Gregorian, he said to himself, just for escaping that woman.

At last he asked his briefcase, "Well—what is it?"

"Judging by the sketches and diagrams scattered within, it's a magical diary—the account book an aspiring sorceror maintains to keep track of his spiritual progress. It's written in a floating cypher, using obsolete alchemical symbols, the sort of thing an extremely bright adolescent might invent."

"Decode it, then."

"Very well." The briefcase thought for a moment, and then said, "The first entry begins: *I killed a dog today.*"

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The famous witch Madame Campaspe, who claimed she had transcended humanity and thus had no need to die and who always carried with her a tame water rat, was nowhere to be found.

Some said she had retired to the Piedmont, where she owned a walled estate in the Iron Lake district under an assumed name, others that she had been drowned by a horrified lover, that her clothes had been discovered by the river and taken to the local church to be burned. Nobody expected her back.

Hammers sang. Workmen were tearing walls from houses and stringing waxflowers over the streets of Rose Hall. The little river community was half dismantled, the houses at its core reduced to roofs and floors so that they might serve as dance pavilions. They looked like so many skeletons, flanked by sad piles of rubble.

The bureaucrat and Chu stood before what was once Madame Campaspe's house. The high roof, ironically like a squared-off version of a witch's peaked cap, and the corner posts were all that remained intact. The interior had been filled with scrap lumber and other inflammables. "What a mess," the bureaucrat said disgustedly of the heaped and broken wardrobes and divans, stained blankets, clotted masses of paper, and filthy brown rugs, the flotsam and jetsam of a hastily abandoned life. A broken-backed stuffed angel shark leered from the bottom. The house reeked of white kerosene.

"It'll make a nice bonfire, anyway," Chu said. She stepped back as a canvas-gloved woman threw in more planks. "Hey—lady! Yeah, you. You from around here?"

The woman brushed back her short black hair with her wrist, not bothering to doff her work glove. "I was born here." Her eyes were green, cool, skeptical. "What do you want to know?"

"The woman who used to live here, the witch. Did you know her?"

"I know of her, of course. Madame Campaspe was the richest woman in Rose Hall. Tough old bird. There was plenty of gossip. But I live on the other side of town. I never actually met her."

Chu smiled dryly. "Of course not. A big place like this, how could you meet her?"

"Actually," the bureaucrat said, "we're more interested in a student of hers. A man named Gregorian. Did you know him?"

"I'm sorry, I—"

"This is the man who made all the commercials," Chu said. Then, when the woman continued to look blank, "On television. Television! Have you ever heard of television?"

Quickly, the bureaucrat said, "Excuse me. I couldn't help but notice that lovely pendant you're wearing. Is it haunt work?"

Startled in the first flush of anger, the woman glanced down at the stone hanging between her breasts. It was smoothly polished, the length of a human thumb, straightedged on one side, curved on the other,

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rounded atop and tapering below to a blunt point. It was too big for a fishing weight and too edgeless and asymmetrical to be a spear point. "It's a shell knife," she said. Then, brusquely, she seized her barrow and trundled it away.

The bureaucrat stared after her. "Have you noticed how evasive the locals get when we start asking questions?"

"Yes, it does seem they've got something to hide, doesn't it?" Chu said thoughtfully. "There's a local trade smuggling haunt artifacts. Stone projectile points, bits of pottery and so on. Things that properly belong to the government. It would be easy enough for a witch to get involved in that sort of thing. They're always poking around in odd places, nosing about boneyards, mucking about ravines. Digging holes."

"Is there much money in haunt artifacts?"

"Well, they aren't exactly making any more of them."

Chu smiled at the bureaucrat and he realized guiltily that his face must bear that exact same expression, sharp little grins with an unclean edge to them, as if they were predators that had caught the scent of blood. "I wonder what they're hiding."

"It'll be interesting to find out."

They headed back to the hotel. In the weeds by the edge of town, some children had caught a nautilus. Shrieking blissfully they rode its shell, two and three at a time, while it slowly pulled itself forward with long, fluid arms. The bureaucrat commiserated silently with the wretched creature. It was hard to imagine it as it would be within the year, soaring and swooping in Ocean's waters, a creature of preternatural speed, of uncanny grace.

In the center of town, they passed through a loose congeries of trucks belonging to entertainers and concessionaires brought in by the local businesses as a farewell gesture. A proud-bellied man was cranking out the canopy for a puppet theater. Others were raising a Wheel into the sky. It all looked tawdry, cheap, immeasurably sad.

The bureaucrat led the way through the lobby and into the hotel bar. It was cool and dark here, cluttered with neon signs advertising discontinued brands of alcohol and behemoth tusks gone chalky with age, and redolent with a lifetime's spillage of cheap ale. Strings of paper flowers gone grey as dust hung over adhesive-backed holos of fighters trapped in greasy rainbow smears while they threw the same famous punches over and over.

A sloppily fat bartender leaned back against a narrow counter, watching television. Their reflections swam up from the depths of a corroded mirror, rising from behind a ragged line of bottles, pale and popeyed, exotics from Ocean's trenches. The bureaucrat put his briefcase up on the bar, and Chu with a nod slipped away to the toilets.

The bureaucrat coughed. With a lurch, the bartender straightened, turned, laughed. "Whoah! You want to know something, I didn't see you there." His head was bald as a toadstool and speckled with thumbprint-sized brown spots. Splaying his hands on the bar, he leaned forward

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leeringly. "So what the fuck can I do for—" He stopped. "That thing for sale?"

The bureaucrat looked down at the briefcase, up at the barkeep. He was the most physically repulsive man the bureaucrat had ever seen. Fleshy growths sprouted from his eyelids like small tentacles; they jiggled as he talked. His oversly smile was a caricature of cunning.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well." The man's teeth were bruised and cracked, his gums purple, his breath sweet with corruption. "I know a man who might be interested in buying such a thing." He winked. "Let's not mention any names."

"I could get in a lot of trouble if I went back up without this."

"Not if it fell in the river." The old troll touched the bureaucrat's arm ingratiatingly, as if to draw him into a shared fantasy universe of conspiracy, treachery, and sleazy profit. "What the fuck. Accidents happen. A smart fucker could arrange for them to happen in front of witnesses."

Suddenly the man's face paled, and he sucked in air between his teeth. Lieutenant Chu's reflection rose up in the mirror. The bartender turned away quickly.

"Where to next?" Chu asked. She glanced curiously at the fat man, now gazing fixedly into the television.

"I still have some things to see to upcountry." The bureaucrat rapped the bar. "Excuse me! Do you have a gate here?"

"Back room," the old man muttered. He didn't look up.

More bodies were discovered today in the Plymouth Hundreds in Estuary Province a newswoman said. *Shown here are just a few of the dozens of corpses removed from shallow graves this morning. Authorities say the hands, feet, and heads had been removed to slow identification.*

"I'd hate to be working homicide hereabouts," Chu commented. "Lots of old scores are being settled nowadays."

In the back room the bureaucrat related his conversation with the bartender to Chu. She whistled softly. "You really do have a way of stumbling into things! Well, now I know where to begin looking. Let me go poke around and see what I can turn up."

"Do you need any help?"

"You'd only be in the way. See to your business. I'll give you a nudge when I find something." She left.

The surrogation device was an antique, ungainly as an armored squid, and too battered to be worth the cost of hauling away. The bureaucrat lay down on a cracked vinyl sofa. Tentacular sensors jointed delicately to touch his forehead. Colors swam behind closed eyelids, resolving into squares, triangles, rectangles. He touched one with his thought.

A satellite picked up the signal and handed it down to the Piedmont. A surrogate body came alive and he walked it out into the streets of Port Richmond.

The House of Retention was a neolithic granite peak, one of the range

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of government buildings known locally as the Mountains of Madness. Its stone halls were infested by small turquoise lizards that skittered away at the surrogate's approach and reappeared behind him. Its walls were damp to the touch. The bureaucrat had never been anywhere, the Puzzle Palace of course excepted, where there was so little green. He was directed to its moist interior where sibyls operated data synthesizers under special license from the Department of Technology Transfer.

It was a long, gloomy walk, and the bureaucrat felt the weight of the building on him every step of the way. The passage took on allegorical dimensions for him, as if he were trapped inside a labyrinth, one he had entered innocently enough in his search for Gregorian, but which he now found himself too far into for retreat but not far enough for any certainty of reaching whatever truth might lie at its center.

When he came to the hall of sibyls he chose a door at random and stepped inside. A thin, sharp-featured woman sat in the center of a workdesk. Dozens of black cables as thick as her little finger looped out of darkness to plug into her skull. They shook when she looked up to see who had entered the room. It was a clumsy set-up, typical of the primitive systems his department enforced when on-planet use of higher-level technologies was unavoidable. "Hello," the bureaucrat said, "I'm—"

"I know who you are. What do you want?"

Somewhere, water slowly dripped.

"I'm looking for a woman named Theodora Campaspe."

"The one with the rat?" The sibyl stared at him unblinkingly. "We have a great deal on the notorious Madame Campaspe. But whether she's alive or dead, and in either case where is not known."

"There's a rumor that she drowned."

The sibyl pursed her lips, squinted judiciously. "Perhaps. She hasn't been seen for a month or so. It's well documented that her clothes were burned on the altar of Saint Jones' outside of Rose Hall. But all that is circumstantial at best. She may simply not want to be found. And of course half our data are corrupt; she may be minding her own business without any intent to deceive anyone."

"But you don't think so."

"No."

"Just what is her business, anyway? What exactly does a witch do?"

"She would never have used that word," the sibyl said. "It has unfortunate political overtones. She always referred to herself as a spiritualist." Her eyes grew dreamy as she drew in widely scattered snippets of information. "Most people did not make that distinction, of course. They came to her back door at night with money and requests. They wanted aphrodisiacs, contraceptives, body chrisms, stillbirth powders to sprinkle before their enemies, potions to swell breasts and change genitalia from male to female, candles to conjure up wealth, charms to win back lost love and to ease the pain of hemorrhoids. We have sworn testimony that she could shed her skin like a haunt and turn into a bird or a fish, suck the blood of her enemies, frighten children with masks,

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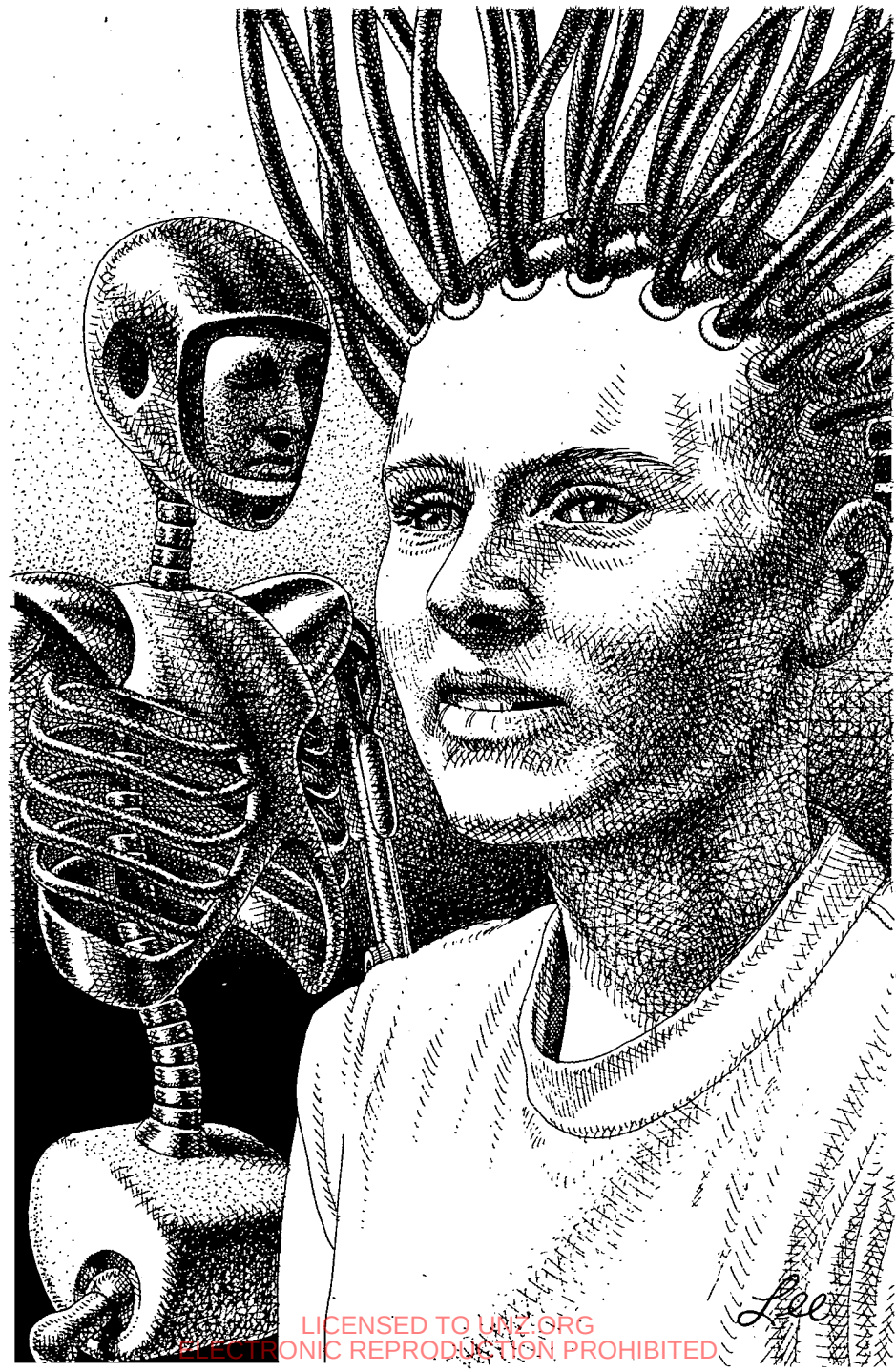
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ride faithless husbands across the hills where it would take them days to return, ring bells from the tops of trees, send dreams to steal the mind or seduce the soul, emerge from swimming in the river and leave no footprints behind, kill animals by breathing in their faces, reveal the location of Ararat and disclose the existence of a gland inside the brain whose secretions are addictive on first taste, walk shadowless at noon, foresee death, prophesy war, spit thorns, avert persecution. If you want specifics, I could spend the rest of the day on them."

"What of the magician Aldebaran Gregorian? What do you have on him?"

She bowed her head to concentrate on the search. "We have the text of his commercials, the data presentation your department made to the Stone House, a recent internal security report bylined Lieutenant-Liaison Chu, and the usual anecdotia: Consorts with demons, blasphemes, hosts orgies, climbs mountains, couples with goats, eats rocks, plays chess, seduces virgins of both sexes, walks on water, fears rain, tortures innocents, defies offplanet authority, washes with milk, consults mystics on Cordelia, employs drugs on himself and others, travels in disguise, drinks urine, writes books in no known language, and so on. None of it reliable."

"And of course you don't know where I can find him."

"No."

The bureaucrat sighed. "Well, one more thing. I want to know the provenance of an artifact I saw recently."

"Do you have a picture?"

"No, but I can visualize it quite clearly."

"I'll have to patch you into the system. Open a splice line, please."

He called up the proper images, and a face appeared before him, twice human size, a gold mask afloat in midair between himself and the sibyl.

It was the face of a god.

Warmly handsome, inhumanly calm, the system tutelar said, "Welcome. My name is Trinculo. Please allow me to help you." His expression was as grave and serene as the reflection of the moon on night waters.

In the back of his head the bureaucrat felt the buzzing encephalic presence of all twenty sibyls hooked into the system. But Trinculo's presence was all-pervasive, riveting, a charismatic aura he could almost touch. Even knowing, as he did, that it was an artifact of the primitive technology, that his attention was artificially focused so rigidly on Trinculo that the hindbrain registered it as awe, the bureaucrat felt humbled before this glowing being. "What do you have on this object?"

He visualized the shell knife. A sibyl picked up the image and hung it in the air over the desk. Another opened a window into a museum catalog. She scanned through bright galleries that looked as if they'd been carved from ice and lifted the knife's twin from a glass shelf. The bureaucrat wondered what the actual museum looked like; he had known collections with perfect catalogs and empty, looted source buildings.

"It's a haunt artifact," one sibyl said.

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"A shell knife, used to unhinge the muscle of midden clams," added another. In the air beside the knife, she opened a window onto a primitive scene depicting a fish-headed haunt squatting by the river demonstrating the tool's use, then closed it again.

"Quite useless now. Humans do not find midden clams digestible."

"This particular knife is about three hundred fifty years old. It was used by a river clan of the Shellfish alliance. It is a particularly fine example of its class, and unlike most such was not gathered by the original settlers on Miranda, but is a product of the Cobbs Creek dig."

"Documentation is available on the Cobbs Creek dig."

"It is presently on display in the Dryhaven Museum of Prehuman Anthropology."

"Is that sufficient or do you wish to know more?"

Trinculo smiled benignly. The tutelar had spoken not a word since his original greeting. "I saw this knife not half an hour ago in the Tidewater," the bureaucrat said.

"Impossible!"

"It must be a reproduction."

"The museum has offplanet security."

"Trinculo," the bureaucrat said, "Tell me something."

In a friendly, competent voice, the gold mask said, "I am here to assist you."

"You have the text of Gregorian's commercials on file."

"Of course we do!" a sibyl snapped.

"Why hasn't he been arrested?"

"Arrested!"

"There's no reason to."

"Whatever for?"

"Gregorian claims he can transform people so that they can live in the sea. That's false representation. He's taking money for doing so. That's fraud. And it looks likely that he's drowning his victims in the course of his fraud. That's murder."

There was a brief silence. Then the sibyl sharing the room with his surrogate, head still down as she sifted through her data, said, "It must first be determined that he can't actually fulfill his claims."

"Don't be ridiculous. Human beings cannot live in Ocean."

"Perhaps they could be adapted."

"No."

"Why not?"

"To take the very simplest matter first, there's hypothermia. If you've ever been swimming, you know how rapidly you grow cold. Your body can afford to lose heat at that rate for only a relatively short time. After a few hours, you've used up your resources and you lose isothermy. You go into shock. And you die."

"Haunts managed to live in the water quite comfortably."

"Human beings are not haunts. We're mammals. We need to maintain a high blood temperature."

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"There are mammals too that live in the water. Otters and seals and the like."

"Because they've evolved to. They're protected by a layer of fat. We're not insulated that way."

"Perhaps that's part of the change that Gregorian makes, an insulating layer of fat."

"I refuse to believe that I'm having such a puerile argument when I'm within an information system!" The bureaucrat addressed the tutelar directly. "Trinculo, tell your people whether such an extreme rearrangement of human physical structure is possible."

Trinculo turned slightly to one side and then to the other in confusion, and stammered, "I'm . . . no, I'm sorry, I . . . can't answer that question."

"It's just a simple correlation of available science!"

"I don't . . . have the . . ." Trinculo's eyes were pained. His glance darted back and forth frantically.

Suddenly the tutelar and the buzzing presence of his attendants were gone. The office was empty save for the sibyl. She had yanked the patch.

The bureaucrat frowned. "Your tutelar seems woefully inadequate for your needs."

The sibyl looked up sharply, making the cables rustle and rattle. "And whose fault is that? It was your own department that sent in the ravishers and berserkers when they decided the Quiet Revolution had gone too far. We had a completely integrated system before your creatures ate holes in it."

"That was a long time ago," the bureaucrat said. He knew of the incident, of course, the quixotic attempt to regear an entire planet to a technological level so low they could afford to cut off all offplanet commerce, but he was surprised to hear her speak of it so emotionally. "Back when the Tidewater was still underwater, just before the Resettlement. Long before either of us was born. Surely there's no need to go into old grievances now."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't have to live with the consequences. You don't have to operate a senile information system. Your people condemned Trinculo as a traitor and burned out all his higher functions. But he's still remembered here as a patriot. Children light candles to him in the churches."

"He was your leader?" The bureaucrat was not surprised, then, that Trinculo's higher functions had been pithed. After what had happened to Earth, there was no creature more feared than an independent artificial entity.

The sibyl shook her cables wrathfully. Drops of condensate went flying. "Yes, he was our leader! Yes, he masterminded the rebellion, if that's what you want to call it. We wanted nothing more than freedom from your interference, your economics, your technology. When Trinculo showed us how we could disentangle ourselves from your control, we didn't stop to ask if he came from a factory or a womb. We'd have dealt

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with the devil for a chance to slip our necks from your noose, but Trinculo was nothing of the kind. He was an ally, a friend."

"You can't disengage from the outside universe, no matter how—" the bureaucrat began. But the woman's skin was white now, her lips thin, her eyes hard. Her face had closed and turned to stone. It was hopeless trying to reason with her. "Well, thank you for your help."

The sibyl glared him out of the room.

The bureaucrat backed outside, turned, and realized he was lost.

As he stood there, hesitating, a door opened down the hall. Out stepped a man who shone as bright as an angel. He looked as if he had swallowed the sun and could not contain its light within his flesh. The bureaucrat turned down external gain, and saw within the dimming figure the steel ribs and telescreen face of a fellow surrogate. It was a face he knew.

"Philippe?" he said.

"Actually I'm just an agent." Philippe had recovered from amazement first; now he grinned in a comradely fashion. "I'm afraid I'm under such pressure at work, I haven't been able to gate here in person." He took the bureaucrat's arm and steered him down the hall. "If that was your first encounter with Trinculo's widows, you need a drink. Surely you have time for a drink."

"You spend a lot of time on Miranda, do you?"

"More than some, less than others." Philippe's teeth were perfect, and his face, even though he was old enough to be the bureaucrat's father, was unlined and pink. He was the living avatar of the eternal schoolboy. "Does it matter?"

"I suppose not. How's my desk doing?"

"Oh, I'm sure Philippe has it well in hand. He's very good at that sort of thing, you know."

"So everyone tells me," the bureaucrat said glumly.

They stepped onto a sudden balcony overlooking a city street. Philippe called a moving bridge and they rode it over the hot river of moving metal to the next wing of the building. "Where is Philippe nowadays?"

"Diligently at work in the Puzzle Palace, I presume. Down this way." They came to a deserted refreshment niche and plugged in. Philippe called up a menu, hooked a metal elbow over the bar. "The apple juice looks good."

The bureaucrat had meant where Philippe was physically. Agenting in realspace was so much more expensive than surrogation—the ministries responsible for the conservation of virtual reality made sure of that—that normally agents were only employed when the primary was so far away the lag time made surrogation impractical. It was clear, though, that the agent wasn't going to answer that particular question.

Back in the hotel, somebody nudged the bureaucrat's shoulder. "I'll be done in a minute," he said without opening his eyes. A drink materialized in his hand, as chill and slippery with moisture as a real glass would be.

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"Tell me," the agent said after a moment. "Does Korda have anything against you?"

"Korda! Why would Korda have anything against me?"

"Well, that's exactly what I was wondering, you see. He's said some odd things lately. About possibly eliminating your position and reassigning your responsibilities to Philippe."

"That's ridiculous. My workload could never be—"

Philippe threw up his hands. "This isn't my doing—I don't want your job. I'm overburdened with responsibility as it is."

"Okay," the bureaucrat said disbelievingly. "All right. Tell me exactly what Korda said to you."

"I don't know. Don't look at me like that! Honestly I don't. Philippe only gave me the broadest outline. You know how cautious he is. He'd keep what he knew from himself, if that were possible. But listen—I'll be merging back into him in a couple of hours. Do you want to give him a message? He could gate down to talk with you."

"That won't be necessary." The bureaucrat swallowed back his anger, hid it away from the agent. "I ought to have this case wrapped up in a day or two. I can talk with him in person then."

"You're that close, are you?"

"Oh, yes. Gregorian's mother gave me a great deal of information. Including an old notebook of Gregorian's. It's full of names and addresses." Actually, the book was largely taken up with occult diagrams and instructions for ceremonies—full of serpents, cups, and daggers—that the bureaucrat found both obscure and tedious. Other than the insights it gave into the young Gregorian's character and youthful megalomania, its only solid lead had been the references to Madame Campaspe. But the bureaucrat wanted to give Philippe something to think about.

"Good, good," the agent said vaguely. He stared down at his hand, swirling the liquid only he could see in its imaginary glass. "Why is it that line-fed fruit juice never tastes as good as what you get in person?"

"That's because when you're just being line-fed the flavor, you don't get the body rush from the sugars and so on." Philippe looked blank. "It's like getting a line-fed beer—all flavor and no alcohol. Only the physical component of apple juice isn't so pronounced, so while your body feels the difference, you're not consciously aware of what the lack is."

"You know a little bit of everything," Philippe said amiably.

When the bureaucrat opened his eyes, Chu was waiting for him.

"I've found it," she said. That small, feral smile again, conspiratorial flash of teeth and gone. "Come on out back."

On the blind side of the hotel was a long storage shed with a single narrow door. Chu had smashed the lock. "I need a light," the bureaucrat said. He took one from his briefcase and entered.

Amid a litter of tools, lumber and scrapwood, were a dozen new-made crates. "They were all set to close up shop," Chu said. Setting a sawhorse

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aside she reached into a crate she'd already ripped open, and handed the bureaucrat a shell knife just like the one he'd seen earlier.

"So they're smuggling artifacts, just as we thought, eh?"

Chu took a second shell knife from the crate, a third, a fourth.

They were all identical.

"There's other stuff too. Pottery, digging sticks, fishnet weights. All in multiplicate." She reached into the shadows. "Look what else I found."

It was a briefcase, the perfect twin of the one the bureaucrat held. He could tell by its markings that it had been issued by his own department.

"You see the scam, don't you? They got hold of some genuine haunt artifacts, fed them to the briefcase and had it make them copies. Then they returned the originals to the source. Or maybe copies, I don't imagine it would make any difference."

"Only to an archeologist. Maybe not even then."

"Did you find out where the knife came from?"

"The original was from Cobbs Creek," the bureaucrat said. "It's on display in Dryhaven."

"Cobbs Creek is just down the river. Not far from Clay Bank."

"I'm less interested in where the artifacts came from than in how the counterfeiters got hold of one of our briefcases. Have you questioned it yet?"

"Don't waste your breath." Chu held it open to the light so that he could see the interior, blackened and blistered. "It's dead."

"Idiots." The bureaucrat took patch lines from his own briefcase and wired the two together. "They must've overloaded it. It's a delicate piece of equipment; if you order it to keep making copies of something and don't take care to keep it supplied with the elements it needs, it'll dismantle itself trying to follow instructions. I need a full readout of this thing's memory."

His briefcase was silent for a second, then said, "There's nothing left but the identification number. It managed to disassemble all its insulation before it died, and the protected memory rotted out."

"Shit."

"Give me a hand with this crate," Chu said.

Grunting and puffing, they wrestled the crate outside, and let it fall to the ground with a crash. The bureaucrat went back in for his briefcase, took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. "Won't all this noise alert the counterfeiters?"

"I'm counting on it."

"Hah?"

Chu took out a cheroot, lit it. "You think the nationals are going to arrest anybody over this? With the jubilee tides so close? A petty little counterfeiting ring that's probably not even cheating Mirandans? Face it, these things are being sold to offplanet tourists. Hereabouts that amounts to a victimless crime. The briefcase might have been a bigger noise, but it's *dead*. Anyway, the hot rumor is that the Stone House is going to announce a general amnesty on crimes committed in the Tide-

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water, a few days before the tides. To make things easier for the evacuation authority. So the national police aren't going to be very excited about this. I figure there's only two things we can do. The first is to throw this crap in the river, so they can't make any more profit off it."

"And the second?"

"That's to make so much noise hauling it out that anyone involved will know we're on to them. *They* don't know about the amnesty. I figure that barkeep must be a mile away by now, and running fast. Wait here, and I'll go requisition a wheelbarrow."

When they came back from the river, the bar was empty and the bartender gone. He had left without even turning off the television. Chu went behind the bar, found a bottle of remscela and poured them both a shot. "To crime," she said.

"I still hate to see them get away."

"Enforcement is a dirty business, sonny," Chu said scornfully. "And there's a lot more dirt down here than you have up in Cloud-wonderland. Buck up, and enjoy your drink like a grown-up."

On the television, a man was arguing with old Ahab about the man's twin brother, long ago lost at sea. *Murderer!* Ahab shouted. *He was your twin, and your responsibility!*

Since when am I my brother's keeper?

Unseen by either, a mermaid peered in at them through a window, her face open with wonder, and with pain.

Five: DOGS AMONG THE ROSES

The strings of waxflowers were all lit now, red-blue-yellow-white fuzz-globes of light swaying overhead, and the music was hot and urgent, a magnetic field in which the revelers swirled and eddied, caught in its invisible lines of force and sent spinning away in a rush of laughter. Among the fantasias were lesser costumes, representational rather than interpretive, angels with carnal smiles, clowns, and sentimental devils with goatees and pitchforks. A satyr stumbled drunkenly by on short stilts, hairy and near-naked, waving panpipes to keep from falling.

The bureaucrat found Chu behind the bandstand, hustling a red-faced young roisterer. She leaned against him, one palm casually resting on his rump, and teased a paper cup from his hand. "No, you don't need any more of that," she said patiently. "We can find better uses for—" The bureaucrat backed away unnoticed.

He let the crowds sweep him down the main street of a transformed Rose Hall, past dance stands, rides and peepshows. Pushing through a cluster of surrogates—kept to the fringes since they weren't physically present—he watched the fantasia presentations for a time, shoved up against the stage with a rowdy group of soldiers with central evac armbands who hooted, whistled and cheered on their favorites. The event

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was too esoteric for his offworld tastes and he drifted on, through the odors of roast boar, fermented cider, and a dozen fairy foods.

Children materialized underfoot and, laughing, were gone.

Somebody hailed him by name, and the bureaucrat turned to face Death. Flickering blue light showed through the sockets of the skull mask, and the bureaucrat could see between metal ribs through to the cape. Death handed him a cup of beer.

"And who are you?" he said, smiling.

Death took his elbow, strolled him away from the bright center of the celebration. "Oh, do let me have my mysteries. It's jubilee, after all." The tattered black cape Death wore smelled musty; the costumier had taken advantage of his distant customer's limited senses. "I'm a friend, anyway."

They came to a footbridge over the little stream marking the end of town. The light here faded to gloom, and the clustered buildings were silent and oppressively dark. "Have you located Gregorian yet?" the surrogate asked.

"Just who *are* you?" the bureaucrat asked, not smiling.

"No, of course you haven't." Death looked to the side distractedly. "Excuse me, somebody's just . . . No, I don't have time to . . . Okay, just leave it right there." Then, directly again. "I'm sorry about that. Listen, I don't have the time, I'm afraid. Just tell Gregorian, when you find him that someone he knows—his sponsor, tell him that his old sponsor will take him in again, if he gives up this folly. Do you understand? That's what you want too, isn't it?"

"Maybe it isn't. Why don't you tell me who you are and what you actually want, and maybe we can work together on this."

"No, no." Death shook his head. "It's a long shot, anyway, probably won't work. But if you have trouble dealing with him, it's an argument you can use. I mean it, he'll know that my word is good." He turned away.

"Wait," the bureaucrat said. "Who are you?"

"I'm sorry."

"Are you his father?"

Death turned to look at him. For a long moment it said nothing; then, "I'm sorry. I have to leave now." The surrogate swayed as if about to fall, and then locking gyros froze into place and it stood there, a statue.

He touched the metal skull. It was inert, lacking the almost subliminal hum of an active unit. Slowly he walked away, turning now and again to look back, but it remained dead.

In the thick of things again, he drained off his spiced beer and picked up a powdered fairy cruller from a drunken teenager who waved away his money: "It's been paid for!" There was a banner on the stand reading TIDEWATER PRODUCE AND ANIMAL BYPRODUCTS COLLECTIVE. He raised the pastry in toast, and wandered into the fairway again, feeling distant and a trifle wistful. All these happy people.

The crowd swirled about him, as changing-unchanging as waves crash-

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ing on the beach, endlessly fascinating even as the eye grabs and fails to comprehend. Faces contorted with laughter that was too shrill, too manic, skin too flush, beaded with sweat. What am I doing here? the bureaucrat asked himself. I'm not going to accomplish anything tonight. The forced gaiety depressed him.

The evening was growing late. The children had evaporated and the adults remaining were louder and drunker. Sucking powdered sugar from his fingers, the bureaucrat almost stumbled into a brawl. Two drunks were pushing a surrogate around, flattening its ribs and ripping off its arms and legs one by one. The thing struggled on the ground, protesting loudly as they tore off its last remaining limb, then went dead as the operator gave up on the evening as a bad cause. The bureaucrat skirted the laughing spectators and continued down the road.

A woman in a green and blue fantasia, Spirit of the Waters perhaps, or Sky and Ocean, emerald plumes flying up from her headdress, came toward him. Her costume was cut low, and she had to hold up the spangled skirt with one hand to keep it from brushing the ground. The crowd parted like water before her, cleaved by an almost tangible aura of beauty. She looked straight at him, her eyes blazing green as the soul of the forest. Nearby, a chanteuse sang that the heart was like a little bird, looking for a nest. She set the crowds swirling like brightly painted metal bobbins. The green woman was swept to him, a mermaid cast up by the sea.

Automatically, the bureaucrat took a step backward to let this vision by. But she stopped him with a touch of one green leather glove. "You," she said, and those green eyes and crisp white teeth seemed about to tear into him, "I want you."

She put an arm about his waist and led him away.

By the edge of the jubilee the woman paused to pluck a waxflower from one sagging string. She cupped it in both hands, and bent at stream's edge to place it in the water. Other flowers bobbed and whirled on the stream, spinning slowly, a stately ballroom dance.

As she crouched over the sphere of light, he saw that her arms above the gloves were covered with stars and triangles, snakes and eyes, gnostic tattoos of uncertain meaning.

Her name, she said, was Undine. They strolled down Cheesefactory Road beyond the ruck of houses, deep into a forest of roses. Thorny vines were everywhere; they climbed pillars formed by trees that had been choked by their profusion, sprawled along the ground, exploded into bloodspeckled bushes large as hills. The air was heavy with their scent, almost cloying. "I should have trimmed these back some," the woman said as they ducked under a looping arch of the small, pink flowers. "But so close to the jubilee tides, who'd bother?"

"Are those native?" asked the bureaucrat, amazed at their extent. The flowers were everywhere he looked.

"Oh, no, these are feral Earth stock. The original industrielle had them

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planted along the roadside; she liked their look. But without any natural enemies, they just exploded. This extends, oh, kilometers around. On the Piedmont, they'd be a problem; here, the tides will just wash them away."

They walked some way in silence. "You're a witch," the bureaucrat said suddenly.

"Oh, you've noticed?" He could feel her amused smile burning in the night air beside his face. The tip of her tongue touched the edge of his ear, gently traced the swirls down into its dark center, withdrew. "When I heard you were looking for Gregorian, I decided to have a look at you. I studied with Gregorian when we were children. Ask me anything you want." They came to a clearing in the rosebushes, and a small unpainted hut. "Here we are."

"Will you tell me where Gregorian is?"

"That's not what you want." That smile again, those unblinking green eyes. "Not at the moment."

"This must have a thousand eyelets," he said, clumsily unhooking the back of the fantasia. A slice of flesh appeared just below the downy nape of Undine's neck, widened, reached downward. The tips of his fingers brushed pale skin, and she shivered slightly. A single waxflower burned on a nightstand beneath a sentimental holo of Krishna dancing. The flame leaped and fell, throwing warm shadows through the room. "There. That's the last of them."

The witch turned, reached hands to shoulders, lowered the gown. Large breasts, the faintest trifle overripe, floated into view, tipped with apricot nipples. Slowly she let the cloth slip down, over a full, soft belly, its deep navel aswim in shadow. A tuft of hair appeared, and laughing she held the dress so that only the very topmost hint of her vagina showed.

"Oh, the heart is like a little bird," she sang softly, swaying in time to the music, "that perches in your hand."

This woman was a trap. The bureaucrat could feel it. Gregorian had his hooks set in her just below the skin. If he were to kiss her, the barbs would pierce his own flesh, too deep and painful to rip out, and the magician would be able to play him like a fish, wearing him down, tiring him out, until he lost the will to fight and sank to the bottom of his life and died.

"And if you do not seize it . . ." She was waiting.

He should leave now. He should turn and flee.

Instead, he reached for her face, touched it lightly, wonderingly. Her lips turned to his, and they kissed deeply. The costume rustled as it fell to the floor. Her hands reached inside his jacket to undo his shirt. "Don't be so gentle," she said.

They tumbled to the bed and she slid him within her. She was wet and open already, slippery and warm and fine. Her soft, wide belly touched him, then her breasts. She was just past her prime, poised on the instant before the long slide into age, and especially arousing to him for that. She'll never be so beautiful again, he thought, so ripe and full

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of juices. She clasped her legs about his waist and rocked him like a ship on the water, gently at first, then faster, as if a storm were building.

Undine, he thought for no reason. Ysolt, Esme, Theodora—the women here have names like dried flowers or autumn leaves.

A gust of wind sent the flowerlight scurrying for the corners, hurrying back again. Undine kissed him furiously on the face, the neck, the eyes. The bed creaking beneath them, they rolled over and over one another, now on the bottom, now on top, and over again, until he lost track of who was on top and who on the bottom, of where his body ended and hers began, of exactly which body belonged to whom. And then at last she was Ocean herself, and he lost all sense of self, and drowned.

"Again," she said.

"I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else," the bureaucrat said amiably. "Someone considerably younger. But if you're willing to wait twenty minutes or so, I'll be more than happy to try again."

She sat up, her magnificent breasts swaying slightly. Faint daggers of Caliban's light slanted through the window to touch them both. The candle had long since guttered out. "You mean to say you don't know the method by which men can have orgasm after orgasm without ejaculating?"

He laughed. "No."

"The girls won't like you if you have to stop a half hour every time you come," she said teasingly. Then, seriously, "I'll teach you." She took his cock in her hand, waggled it back and forth, amused by its limpness. "After your vaunted twenty minutes. In the meantime, I can show you something of interest."

She threw the blanket lengthwise over her shoulders, as if it were a shawl. It made a strange costume in the dim light, with sleeves that touched the ground and a back that didn't quite reach her legs, so that two pale slivers of moon peeped out at him. Naked, he padded after her into the clearing behind the hut. "Look," she said.

Light was bursting from the ground in pale sheets of pink and blue and white. The rosebushes shimmered with pastel light as if already drowned in Ocean's shallows. The ground here had been dug up recently, churned and spaded, and was now suffused with pale fire. "What is it?" he asked wonderingly.

"Iridobacteria. They're naturally biophosphorescent. You'll find them everywhere in the soil in the Tidewater, but usually only in trace amounts. They're useful in the spiritual arts. Pay attention now, because I'm going to explain a very minor mystery to you."

"I'm listening," he said, not comprehending.

"The only way to force a bloom is to bury an animal in the soil. When it decomposes, the iridobacterium feed on the products of decay. I've spent the last week poisoning dogs and burying them here."

"You killed *dogs?*" he said, horrified.

"It was quick. What do you think is going to happen to them, when

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the tides come? They're like the roses, they can't adapt. So the humane society people organized Dog Control Week and paid me by the corpse. Nobody's about to haul a bunch of mutts to the Piedmont." She gestured. "There's a shovel leaning against my hut."

He fetched the shovel. In a month this land would be under water. He imagined fishes swimming through the buildings while drowned dogs floated mouths open, caught head down in tangles of browning rosebushes. They would rot before the hungry kings of the tides would accept their carcasses. At the witch's direction, he shoveled the brightest patches of dirt into a rusty steel drum almost filled with rainwater. The dirt sank and bright swirls of phosphorescence rose in the water. Undine skimmed the top with a wooden scraper, slopping the scum into a wide pan. "When the water evaporates, the powder that remains is rich in iridobacteria," she said. "There's several more steps necessary to process it, but now it's in concentrated form, that can wait until I reach the Piedmont. It's common as sin now, but it won't grow up there."

"Tell me about Gregorian," the bureaucrat said.

"Gregorian is the only perfectly evil man I've ever met," Undine said. Her face was suddenly cold, as harsh and stern as Caliban's rocky plains. "He is smarter than you, stronger than you, more handsome than you, and far more determined. He has received an offplanet education that's at least the equal of yours, and he's a master of occult arts in which you do not believe. You are insane to challenge him. You are a dead man, and you do not know it."

"He'd certainly like me to believe that."

"All men are fools," Undine said. Her tone was light again, her look disdainful. "Have you noticed that? Were I in your position, I'd arrange to contract an illness or develop a moral qualm about the nature of my assignment. It might be a black mark on my record, but I would outlive the embarrassment."

"When did you meet Gregorian?" The bureaucrat dumped more dirt in the drum, raising mad swirls of phosphorescence.

"That was the year I spent as a ghost. I was a foundling. Madame Campaspe bought me the year I first bled—she'd seen promise in me. I was a shy, spooky little thing to begin with, and as part of my training, she imposed the discipline of invisibility. I kept to the shadows, never speaking. I slept at odd times and in odd places. When I was hungry I crept into the homes of strangers and stole my food from their cupboards and plates. If I was seen, Madame beat me—but after the first month, I was never seen."

"That sounds horribly cruel."

"You are in no position to judge. I was watching from the heart of an ornamental umbrella bush the morning that Madame tripped over Gregorian. Literally tripped—he was sleeping on her doorstep. I learned later that he'd walked two days solid without food he was so anxious to become her apprentice, and then collapsed on arrival. What a squawk! She kicked him into the road, and I think he broke a rib. I climbed to

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the roof of her potting shed and saw her harass him out of sight. Quick as a thought, I slid to the ground, stole a turnip for my breakfast from the garden and was gone. Thinking that was the last of that ragged young man.

"But the next day he was back.

"She chased him away. He came back. Every morning it was the same. He scrounged for food during the day—I do not know if he stole, worked or sold his body, for I was not quite interested enough to follow him, though by now I could walk down the center of Rose Hall in broad daylight without being noticed. But every morning he was back on the stoop.

"After a week, she changed tactics. When she found him on the doorsill, she would throw him some small change. The little ceramic coins that were current then, the orange and green and blue chips—they've gone back to silver since. She treated him as a beggar. Because, you see, he held himself very proudly, and there was a dirty grey trace of lace on the cuffs of his rags; she could tell he was haut-bourgeois. She thought to shame him away. But he'd snatch the coins from the air, pop them into his mouth and very ostentatiously swallow. Madame pretended not to notice. From the attic window of the beautician's shop across the street, I watched this duel between her stiff back and his nasty grin.

"A few days later I noticed a horrible smell by the stoop, and discovered that he'd been shitting behind the topiary bushes. There was a foul heap of his leavings studded with the ceramic coins she had been throwing him. So that finally Madame had no choice but to take him in."

"Why?"

"Because he had the spirit of a magician. He had that unswerving, unbreakable will that the spiritual arts require, and the sudden instinct for the unexpected. Madame could no more ignore him than a painter could ignore a child with perfect visualization. Such a gift only comes along once in a generation.

"She tested him. You are familiar with the device used to give the experience of food to surrogates?"

"The line-feed. Yes, very familiar."

"She had one mounted in a box. An offworld lover had wired it up for her. It was stripped down so that she could feed raw current into the nerve inductor. Do you know how it would feel to hold your hand within its field?"

"It would hurt like hell."

"Like Hell indeed." She smiled sadly and he could see the ghost of the schoolgirl behind her smile. "I remember that box so well. A plain thing with a hole in one side and a rheostat on top calibrated from one to seven. If I close my eyes I can see it, and her long fingers atop it, and that damned water rat of hers perched on her shoulder. She warned me that if I took my hand out of the box before she told me to, she would kill me. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. Even Gregorian, ingenious though he was, could never top that."

Undine skimmed more slop off the water. Her voice was soft and rem-

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iniscent. "When she moved the dial off zero, it felt like an animal had bitten right through my flesh. Then slowly, oh excruciatingly slowly, she moved it up to one, and that was an order of magnitude worse. What agonies I suffered! I was crying aloud by three, and blind with pain by four. At five I yanked out my hand, determined to die.

"She gave me a hug then, and told me she had never seen anyone do as well, that I would someday be more famous than she."

For a long moment the witch was silent.

"I slipped through an open window and into the next room when Madame led Gregorian in. More silent than a wraith, I drifted from shadow to shadow, leaving not the echo of a footfall behind. I left the door open one fingerspan, so I could peer from darkness into light. Then I retreated to a closet within the second room. Through the crack of the door I could see their distant reflections in the mantel mirror. Gregorian was skinny, barefoot and dirty. I remember thinking how insignificant he looked alongside Madame Campaspe's aristocratic figure.

"Madame sat him down by the hearth. A murmur of voices as she explained the rules. She drew away the fringed cloth that covered the box. Cocky as a crow, he placed his hand within.

"I saw his face jump—that involuntary hop of the muscles—when she first touched the dial. I saw how pale he grew, how he trembled as she increased the pain. He did not take his eyes off of her.

"She took him all the way up to seven. His body was rigid, his fingers spasming, but his head held straight and unforgiving and he had not blinked. I think even Madame feared him then. Sitting there in his ragged clothes, his eyes burning like lanterns.

"I was so still my heart did not beat. My immobility was perfect. But somehow Gregorian knew. His head rose and he looked in the mirror. He saw me, and he grinned. A horrible grin, a skull's grin, but a grin nonetheless. And I knew then that try though she might, she would never break him."

"I'm done now." She set a piece of cheesecloth over the tray, and the bureaucrat followed her back inside, slim crescent moons winking at him one after the other from beneath the blanket.

"What's it good for?" he asked when they were both seated on the bed again, facing each other cross-legged, her vagina sweet dark shadow within the protective circle of her legs. "The powder you make from dogs."

"We mix it with ink and inject it beneath the skin." She rotated a hand before his face; in the shadows it was colorless, unmarked. "Each design represents a ritual the woman of power is entitled to perform, and every ritual represents knowledge, and all knowledge properly applied is control." Suddenly a marking on her hand flared into light. It was a small fish, visible through the skin. "Turning the markings on and off at will is a reminder of that control." One by one the tattoos flickered on: a pyramid, a vulture, a wreath of cocks. Stars flared into subdermal novae and struck fire to serpents, to moons, to alchemical elementals. "Mir-

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andan microflora is all but incompatible with Terran biology. Injected beneath the skin, they can get enough nourishment to stay alive but not enough to grow. There they stay, starving and comatose until I awaken them." Now all the tattoos were aglow. They climbed her arms almost to her shoulders.

"How do you do that?"

"Oh, that's one of the very first things you learn, how to raise the temperature of your body. Here." She lifted one of his hands. "It takes next to nothing. Concentrate on your fingertips, will them to be warmer. Think of hot things. Try to make them hot." She waited, then said, "Well?"

His fingertips tingled. "I'm not sure."

"You think it's just power of suggestion." A tiny starburst appeared at the tip of her finger, floated before his eye. "This is the first marking I received. Turn your finger hot, the goddess said, and it burst into light. I was so amazed. I felt then that my life had taken a great turn, that nothing would ever be the same again." She was touching his leg gently, sliding fingers slowly up, rapidly down, stroke stroke stroke.

"What goddess said?"

"When someone teaches you that which is of spiritual value, you do not learn such things from a human: the person partakes of divinity, becomes as one with the godhead. Thus when Madame Campaspe taught Gregorian and me, she was to us the goddess." Her hand reached up, to stroke his penis, which almost without his noticing it had grown hard and aroused again. "Well! It's time for me to be your goddess now." She lay back, legs wide, and drew him atop her.

"I want to talk about Gregorian," the bureaucrat said uncertainly. She had him by both hands now and was sliding him into her warm depths.

"No reason we can't do both." She clasped him tight and rolled him over, so that she sat on top. "The ritual you are about to learn from the goddess, the way of controlling ejaculation, is known as the worm ouroboros, after the great serpent of Earth which eats its own tail forever and is replenished thereby: a perfect closed systeme, such as does not exist on the mundane realm, not even your floating metal cities." She moved up and down on him slowly, graceful as a swan in moonglimmer, and he reached up to caress her breasts. "It has physical benefits that extend beyond the obvious, and is an excellent introduction to the Tantric mysteries. What specifically do you want to know about Gregorian?"

His hands slid down the front of her body, touched gently the tip of her pinkness, moved to clasp her as she eased herself down on him: nipples, breasts, belly, chin. "I want to know where I can find him."

"Somewhere downriver, I'd guess. People say he has a permanent place in Ararat, but who can say? He doesn't really need a permanent address because he never allows people to find him."

"What about the people who pay to be changed into sea dwellers?"

"They don't find him—he finds them. He's looking for a special sort of person, isn't he? Anxious to stay in the Tidewater, willing to change

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into a nonhuman shape to do so, ready to be convinced by Gregorian's commercials and rich enough to pay his prices. I'm sure he had a sucker list drawn up long ago."

"When did you see him last?"

"Oh, it was years and years ago." Her teeth played with his earlobe; her breath was warm on his cheek. "He was headed for Ocean when he finally left Madame, but he got no further than heliostat station seventeen. He met somebody there, and the next anybody heard, he was offplanet. Do you like this?" Her nails ran lightly up his sides.

"Yes."

"Good." She put her hands at the base of his spine and abruptly raked them up his back. He arced involuntarily, sucking in air. She'd left stinging tracks up his skin. "You like that too, and it surprises you, doesn't it? I learned that with Gregorian; he became a god and taught me how close pleasure and pain lie to each other." She laughed at him. "But one lesson per evening—pull out of me and lie down, I have something to show you."

She guided him over on his side, gently lifted one of his knees and lowered her head between his legs. Playfully, she kissed the tip of his penis, slid her tongue down its stalk, teased his balls with her lips. "Down here, this soft spot midway between your scrotum and your anus." She tickled it with her tongue. "Can you feel it?"

"Yes."

"Good. Ease your left hand down here—no, from behind, that's good. Now push at the spot I just showed you with the tips of your forefinger and middle finger. A little harder. Just so." She reared up on her knees. "Now I want you to breathe in deeply the way I do, not from the lungs but from the abdomen." She demonstrated and the bureaucrat smiled at the solemn beauty of her breasts in the pale moonlight. Gently but firmly she moved his hand away. "It's your turn now. Sit up for this. Draw in deeply and slowly."

He obeyed.

"From the stomach."

He tried again.

"That's the way." She leaned back on her hands, put her legs about his waist and drew him close. "This time I want you to pay attention to your body. When you feel ready to ejaculate—not when it's already begun, but just before—reach back and push down on yourself as I showed you. At the same time breathe in deeply, slowly. It should take about four seconds." She waved a hand back and forth slowly four times, counting out the beats. "Like that. You can slow down while you're doing that, but don't stop entirely, okay?"

"If you say so," the bureaucrat said dubiously.

The tip of his cock was touching her. Undine steadied it, and slid forward, atop it. "Ahhh," she said. Then, "You think it's too easy, that if something so simple were as effective as I say your mommy would have told you about it, eh? Well, whether you believe me or not is of no

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importance. As long as you do as I say, you can postpone ejaculation indefinitely."

He clasped her tightly, lay back beneath her. "I think—"

"Don't."

He followed the exercise faithfully, listening to his body and stopping the ejaculation whenever it threatened. The moon rocked crazily through the window. Then an astonishing thing happened. Shortly after one of the near-ejaculations, he had an orgasm. The sensation took him and he cried out, seizing Undine with all his strength, and felt the small taste of God wash through him. Then the orgasm was through and he hadn't come yet. He was still erect, and strangely clear-headed, preternaturally aware and alert.

"What was that?" he asked in amazement.

"Now you understand," Undine said. "Orgasm is more than just a squirt of salt fluid." She was moving atop him, like a ship in the swell before the storm, her eyes half-lidded, her mouth open slightly. She licked her lips, smiled almost jeeringly. Her hair and breasts were sweaty. "You haven't mentioned Gregorian recently. Have you run out of questions?"

"Just the opposite, I'm afraid." He played with one breast, tracing circles about the aureole, lightly tugging at the nipple with thumb and forefinger. "My questions multiply with each answer. I don't understand why your mistress mistreated Gregorian so, why she tried to break him with pain. Surely that was counterproductive."

"With Gregorian it was," she agreed. "But had it worked. . . . There's really no way to make you understand this without undergoing a similar experience. You'll have to take my word for it. But when the goddess claims your life, the first thing she has to do is to shatter your old world, in order to force you into the larger universe. The mind is lazy. It's comfortable where it is, and can only be driven into reality with pain or fear.

"But this is never done with malice, but with love. At the end of her test, Madame hugged me. I thought she despised me, I believed I was about to die, and then she hugged me. I can't tell you how good that hug felt. Better than anything we've done tonight. Better than anything I'd ever felt before. I cried. I felt wrapped in love, and I knew that I would do anything to be worthy of it. I would have died for that woman in that instant."

"But this didn't happen with Gregorian."

"No." She rocked slightly from side to side, moving him within her. "She never broke Gregorian. She tried many times, and each failed attempt made him stronger and more savage. And that's why he's going to kill you." Abruptly she rolled him atop her. For a second he was afraid he'd hurt her with his weight. "Well, in the meantime," she said, "I have my own uses for you."

He had four more orgasms before he finally came, and that final time

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was of an order of magnitude more intense than anything he'd ever felt before.

He did not so much fall asleep as pass out.

When he awoke, Undine was gone. Groggily, he looked about the room: the furniture remained and a few discarded oddments. The fantasia lay on the floor, sad and a little tattered, several of the long rainbird plumes already broken. But there was an emptiness, a sense of abandonment about the room; all personal touches were gone. He dressed and left.

It was late in the morning. Prospero was already high in the sky, and the town was empty. Doors hung open. Bedthings lay where they'd been flung in the grass. The husks of last night's fantasias littered the streets, like abandoned cicada shells. The bureaucrat strolled back to the center of Rose Hall, head clearing slowly, and felt like singing. His body ached, but pleasantly; his cock felt pink and raw. All he needed was a good breakfast to put him right with the world.

Chu stood by a truck with "The New Born King" painted on the fender, and ARSHAG MINTOUCHIAN'S STRING THEATER AND ILLUSARIUM OF HEAVEN AND HELL, THE TEN MILLION CITIES AND THE ELEVEN WORLDS in seven garish colors on the van's sidewall. The bureaucrat remembered seeing it last night, shutters open and a puppet play in progress. Chu was talking to a fat, sweaty man with a fastidious little mustache. Arshag Mintouchian himself, evidently. "Have a good night?" she asked, and abruptly burst into laughter.

The bureaucrat stared at her in astonishment. Then Mintouchian too began laughing.

"What the hell's so funny?" the bureaucrat demanded, offended.

"Your hand," Chu said. "Oh, I see you've had a night to remember!" Then they were off again, the two of them, soared aloft on gusts of laughter like kites.

The bureaucrat looked at his hand. There was a fresh new tattoo there, a serpent that circled the middle finger of his left hand three times and then took its tail in its mouth.

Six: LOST IN THE MUSHROOM RAIN

"I'm the biggest thing you've ever seen," Mintouchian's thumb said. "Hey, I don't want to brag, babe, but you're gonna be sore in the morning." It paraded back and forth, proud as a rooster.

"Mmmm, I can see that," said Mintouchian's other hand, the one held closed with a long vulval slit between thumb and forefingers slightly ajar. "Come here, big boy!" He gaped it suddenly wide.

Everybody laughed.

"Modeste!" Le Marie called. "Arsene! Come and look at this."

"This isn't really the sort of thing children should witness," the bu-

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reaucrat demurred softly. Two pig farmers and one of the evac planners looked at him and he reddened.

But none of the youngsters came in from the next room. They were watching television, engrossed in a fantasy world in which people traveled between stars not in lifetimes but in hours, where energies sufficient to level cities were wielded by lone altruists, where men and women changed sex four and five times a night, where everything was possible and nothing was forbidden. It was a scream straight from the toad buried at the base of the brain, that ancient monster that wants everything at once, delivered to its feet and set ablaze.

The children sat in the darkness, saucer-eyed and unblinking.

"I'm so good. I'm gonna stretch you all out of shape."

"So you keep *saying*."

It was raining outside, but the kitchen was an island of warmth and light. Chu leaned against a wall, drink in one hand, careful to laugh no more than anyone else. The room smelled of fried pork brains and old linoleum. Under the table Anubis noisily thumped his tail. Le Marie's wife bustled about clearing away the dishes.

The landlord himself brought out two more pitchers of blood mixed half and half with fermented mare's milk. "Have another glass! I can't give it away!" The skinny old man set a glass before Mintouchian. With a small, tipsy smile and a nod, the puppeteer interrupted his performance to accept it. He drank deep, leaving a thin transient line of foam on the bottom edge of his mustache. Other roomers held forth their glasses as he returned his thumb and fist to combat.

"Don't you want any?"

"No, no, I'm stuffed."

"Try some! Do you have any idea how much this costs down north?"

Smiling, the bureaucrat held up his hands and shook his head. When the old man shrugged and turned away, he slipped backward out onto the porch. As the door was closing, Mintouchian's fist spat out a limp and subdued thumb.

It giggled. "Next!"

Raindrops fell like small hammers, so hard they stung when they struck flesh. The bureaucrat stood on the lightless porch, staring through the screens. The world was all one color, neither grey nor brown, but something that partook of both and neither. A sudden gust of wind parted the rain like curtains and gave him a glimpse of the barges anchored on the river, then hid them away again. A house and a half down the street, all of Cobbs Creek faded to nonexistence.

Cobbs Creek was all hogs and lumber. The last of the pigs had already been butchered and hung in the smokehouses, but logs still floated down the creek to the mills, in a final fevered slashing of timber before the tides turned the trees to kelp. The bureaucrat watched the rain splash mud knee-high on the clapboard walls. It forced up the stale smell of

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earth from ground and road, tempered by the rising odors from the tomato bush by the herb garden and the red brick walkway around to the back.

He felt sad and lost and he could not stop thinking of Undine. When he closed his eyes, he could taste her tongue, feel the touch of her breasts. The nail tracks lingering on his back stung at the memory of her. He felt utterly ridiculous and more than a little angry at himself. He was not a schoolboy to be haunted so by the vision of her eyes, her cheeks, the warm amusement in her smile.

He sighed, took Gregorian's notebook from his briefcase, flipped idly through its pages. *A new age of magic interpretation of the world is coming, of interpretation in terms of the will and not of the intelligence. There is no such thing as truth, either in the moral or the scientific sense.* Impatiently, he skipped ahead.

What is good? Whatever increases the feeling of power, the will to power, and above all else, power itself. Rereading the words he could see the young Gregorian in his mind, the doubtless gaunt magician-apprentice, filled with that sourceless teenage hunger for importance and recognition. *Men are my slaves.*

He put the book back, irritated by the naive posturing tone of its aphorisms. He knew this type of young man all too well; there had been a time when he was one of them. Then something tugged at his mind and he took the notebook out again. There was an early exercise captioned The Worm Ouroboros. He read through the instructions carefully: *The magician places his wand in the chalice of the goddess. The handmaid herself* . . . Yes, under the newly transparent allegory was the same technique Undine had taught him the other day.

The people in the kitchen laughed again.

The bureaucrat found himself wishing the day were over, that the roads were safe to travel again, and he could be off and away. This town had been nothing but disappointing. The archeologists who had worked here were gone, the dig covered over and ground-stabilized, all trace of Gregorian lost in the outmigration of citizens to the Piedmont.

He squinted into the rain. There was a faint smudge of light in the gloom to the east, indistinct, almost nonexistent, and for a second he thought the storm was ending. Then it moved slightly. Not a natural light, then.

Who would be out on a day like this? he wondered.

The light brightened slowly, intensifying, drawing in on itself, picking up a touch of blue coloration. Now he could see it for what it was: the glowing videoscreen face of a surrogate trudging through the rain. Slowly, the body took shape beneath that spark of blue—a scarecrow caricature of human form, with a rain slicker tied about the body and a wide-brimmed hat lashed to the headpiece to help keep water out of the mechanism.

Raincoat flapping in the wind, the surrogate approached.

It came straight for the hotel. The bureaucrat saw now that it carried

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something under one arm, a long, skinny box, exactly the right length to hold a dozen roses or perhaps a short rifle.

The bureaucrat stepped to the edge of the doorway, down onto the top step. Rain spattered his shoes, but an overhanging eave sheltered the rest of him. The surrogate came to the foot of the stoop and looked up at him, grinning.

It was the false Chu.

"Who are you?" the bureaucrat said coldly.

"My name is Veilleur. If it matters." Veilleur smiled with sweet indifference. "I have a message for you from Gregorian. And a gift."

He frowned down at that arrogant adolescent smirk. This must surely be what Gregorian had been like in his youth. "Tell Gregorian I wish to speak with him in person, on a matter of interest to us both."

Veilleur pursed his lips with mock regret. "I'm afraid that the master is terribly busy these days. There are so many who desire his help. But if you care to share your matter of concern with me, I'd be happy to do whatever I can."

"It's of a confidential nature."

"Alas. Well, my business is brief. Master Gregorian understands that you have come into possession of a certain item which has some sentimental value to him."

"His notebook."

"Just so. A valuable learning tool, I might point out, that you lack the training to take advantage of."

"Still, it is not exactly devoid of interest."

"Even so, my master must beg its return. He trusts you will prove cooperative, particularly considering that the book is not, properly speaking, yours."

"Tell Gregorian he can pick up his book from me any time he wishes. In person."

"I am in the master's confidence. What can be said to him can be said to me, what can be given him can be given me. In a sense one might say that where I am he is indeed present."

"I won't play this game," the bureaucrat said. "If he wants his book, he knows where I am."

"Well, what can't be arranged one way must be arranged another," Veilleur said philosophically. "I was also instructed to give you this." The surrogate laid its box at the bureaucrat's feet. "The master directed me to tell you that a man bold enough to fuck a witch deserves something to remember her by."

Briefly, his electronic grin burned on the telescreen, bright as madness. Then the surrogate turned away.

"I've spoken to Gregorian's father!" the bureaucrat shouted. "Tell him that, too!"

The surrogate strode away without a backward glance. The wind lifted and swirled its raincoat, and then it was gone.

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Suddenly fearful, the bureaucrat crouched down and lifted the box. It held something heavy. He stepped back onto the porch, unwrapping the wet oilskin, then removed the lid.

Stars, snakes and comets burned wildly in the box's dim interior. Putrefaction had just begun, and the iridobacteria were feasting.

The laughter in the kitchen died when he entered. "Lord of ghouls, man," Le Marie said, "What happened to you?" Chu seized his arm, steadied him.

"I'm afraid something unfortunate has occurred," a voice said. His own. The bureaucrat laid down the box on the kitchen table. A little girl wearing a red jeunes evacuees kerchief with tiny black stars about her neck craned up on tiptoe to reach for the box, and had her hand slapped. Mintouchian, who stood close enough to see within, hastily slapped the lid back on and rewrapped the cloth. "Something untoward." He sounded dreadful, like a recording played at the wrong speed, false and subtly inhuman.

A scurry of activity. Two men ran outside. A chair was scraped forward, and Le Marie folded him down into it. "I'll call the nationals," Chu said. "They can lift in a laboratory as soon as the rain ends." Somebody gave the bureaucrat a drink, and he gulped it down. "My God," he said. "My God." Anubis emerged from beneath the table and licked his hand.

The men who had run outside returned, wet to the skin. The door slammed to behind them. "Nobody out there," one said.

More children came crowding in. Mother Le Marie hastily set the box up atop the pie cabinet, out of reach. "What's in there?" one of the locals asked from the far side of the kitchen.

"Undine," the bureaucrat said. "It's Undine's arm." To his utter and complete embarrassment, he burst into tears.

They led him protesting feebly to his room, eased him down on the bed, took off his shoes. His briefcase was laid by his side. Then, with consoling murmurs they left him alone. I shall never be able to sleep, he thought. The room smelled of mildew and old paint. Barnacles speckled the walls and encrusted the mirror, from flies blown in at night by the fever wind, over the top of a window that would not quite close. Wind through that same narrow slot stirred the curtains now. Doubtless it would never be repaired.

The dim thunder of water on the roof slowly faded as the storm abated. The rain died away to a drizzle and finally a mist.

A voice separated from the kitchen conversation and floated up the stairs. "Mushroom rain," it said gently.

The bureaucrat could not sleep. The pillow was hard and buzzed with fatigue. His skull was stuffed with grey cotton. After some time he arose, picked up his briefcase, and went outside, shoeless and unnoticed.

The rain was so fine that the droplets seemed to hang in the air, muting

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and silvering a changed world. Sprays of translucent blue tubes arched over the street. Little violet mandolins sprouted from doorways, and the rooftops were hidden under delicate fantasy architectures of tan and rose and palest yellow latticework. Mushroom rain. The frothy structures were growing even as he watched.

Houses had mutated into nightmare castles caught midway in transition from stone to organic life. Like a crab he scuttled by their swaying spires, brushing back dainty lace fans that crumbled at his touch. There was a warm orange glow in the street ahead of him and he made for it.

The rectangle of light was the open back doorway to the New Born King's van. He entered.

Mintouchian sat behind a small folddown table. A circle of yellow light rested on its center, and within it danced a small metal woman.

Mintouchian's fingers were studded with radio remotes. He wove his hands back and forth, warping and interpenetrating the fields. "Ah, it's you. Couldn't sleep, eh?" he said. "Me neither." He nodded toward the woman. "Lovely little thing, isn't she?"

Looking closer, the bureaucrat could see that the woman's figure was made up of thousands of gold rings of varying sizes, so that the arms and legs and torso tapered naturally. Her head was smooth and featureless, but angled to suggest high cheekbones and a narrow chin. She wore a simple cloth poncho tied at the waist and long enough to suggest a dress. It flew up in the air when Mintouchian spun his hands.

"Yes." The golden woman rippled her arms with impossible, thousand-jointed fluidity. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking." Mintouchian stared blindly down into the light. "I loved a witch once, a long time ago. She—well, you don't want to hear the story. Very much like yours. Very much. She was drowned when I . . . Well. There's no such thing as a new story, is there? As who should know better than me?"

Without interrupting the dancer he half-closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall. The wall was covered with puppets, bagged in plastic membranes and bound so tightly escape was unimaginable. It was a museum of puppetry. There were Mr. Punch and his wife Judy, his cousin Pulchinello, moon-pale Pierrot, famed Harlequin and sweet Columbine, Tricky Dick, Til Eulenspiegel, Good Kosmonaut Minsk, all the ancient archetypes of roguery and heroism awaiting their next breath of borrowed life. "You realize that puppetry is the purest form of theater?"

"The simplest, you mean?"

"Simple! You give it a try, if you think it's so simple! No, I mean the purest. Here I sit, the creator, and you there, the viewer. Our minds are distinct, they cannot touch. But here, between us, I place our little poppet." The lady glided forward, swooned into a curtsey that swept the ground, drew up lightly as a leaf caught by the wind. "She exists partly in my mind, and partly in yours. For the instant they overlap." His hands were dancing, and the metal figure with them. The bureaucrat's attention shifted from one to the other, unable to focus entirely on either.

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"Look," Mintouchian marveled. The doll froze motionless. "She has no face, no sex. Yet look at this." The puppet raised her head coquettishly, and glanced sidelong at the bureaucrat. Her body shifted weight on distinctly feminine hips. The bureaucrat looked up from her and saw Mintouchian staring intently into his eyes. "Do you know how television works? The screen is divided into horizontal lines, and the scanner draws a picture on the screen two lines at a time, skips two lines, then draws two more, down to the bottom. Then it goes back to the beginning and fills in those spaces it skipped the first time around. So that you don't actually see the whole picture at any time. You assemble it within your mind. Holistic screens have been tried from time to time, but people didn't take to them. They lacked the compulsive element of real television. Because they only provided pictures. They did not seduce the brain into cooperating with the violation of reality." The puppet danced lightly, gracefully.

The bureaucrat's lips were dry and there was a strange, vivid taste in his mouth. He had a hard time focusing on the puppeteer's argument. "I'm not sure I'm following this."

The golden woman threw the bureaucrat a scornful look over an upraised shoulder. Mintouchian smiled. "Where does this illusion before you exist? In my mind or yours? Or does it exist within the space in which our two minds intermesh?"

He raised his hands and the woman dissolved in a shower of golden rings.

The bureaucrat looked up at Mintouchian and the rings continued to spin and fall within his mind. He closed his eyes and saw them in the blackness, still falling. Opening his eyes did not rid him of them. The van seemed oppressively close and then as if it were not there at all. It seemed to pulse open and shut about him. He felt queasy. Carefully he said, "There is something wrong with me."

But Mintouchian was not listening. In a musing, drunken voice, he said, "Sometimes people ask why I got into this business. I don't know. Usually I just say, Why would anyone want to play God? Make a face and shrug. But sometimes I think it's because I wanted to prove to myself that other people exist." He looked straight at and through the bureaucrat, as if he were alone and talking to himself. "But we can't know that, can we? We can never really know."

The bureaucrat left without saying a word.

He wandered down to the river. The docks were transformed. He looked over a sudden forest of gold mushrooms that had swallowed up a line of electric lights, and now burned with borrowed light, fairy peninsulas out into the water. He looked again and saw naked women wading in the river. With slow grace the moon-white women glided by the anchored boats, stirring them with gentle wake, their eyes level with the tips of the masts.

The bureaucrat stared up at them wonderingly, these silent phantoms,

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and thought, there are no such creatures, though for the life of him he could not imagine why not. Thigh-deep, they moved silent as dreams and large as dinosaurs, somnambulant yet bold as a wish. Something black turned and tumbled in the water, bumped against one rounded belly and sank away, and for one horrible instant he feared it was Undine herself, drowned in the river and gone to feed the hungry kings of the tides.

Then, with an electric thrill of terror he saw one of the women turn to look directly at him, eyes as green as the sea and merciless as a northern squall. She smiled down on him over perfect breasts, and he stumbled back from her. Drugged, he thought, I have been drugged. And the thought made wonderful sense, struck him with the force of revelation even, though he did not know what to do with it.

With no sense of transition whatsoever he found himself walking through the woods. The trail was hedged around with mushrooms, bristling with soft-tipped spears that brushed their fleshy heads lightly against his face and arms as he passed. I must find help, he thought. If only he knew which way the trail went, toward town or away.

"What did you do then?"

"Hah?" The bureaucrat shook himself, looked around, and realized that he was sitting on the forest floor, staring at the blue screen of a television set. The sound was off and the image inverted, so that the people hung down from above like bats. "What did you say?"

"I said: What did you do then? Is there some problem with your hearing?"

"I've been having a little trouble preserving continuity lately."

"Ah." The fox-faced man opposite him gestured at the set. "Let us watch some more television, then."

"It's upside-down," the bureaucrat protested.

"Is it?" The fox man stood, flipped the television over effortlessly, squatted again. He was not wearing any clothing, but there was a folded pair of dungarees where he had been sitting. The bureaucrat had likewise made a pad of his jacket to protect himself from the damp. "Is that better?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you see."

"There are two women fighting. One has a knife. They are rolling over and over in the dirt. Now one is standing. She brushes her hair back from her forehead. She's all sweaty and she holds up the knife and looks at it. There's blood on the blade."

The fox sighed. "I have fasted and bled for six days without results. Sometimes I doubt I will ever be holy enough to see the pictures."

"You cannot see any images on television?"

A sly smile, a twitch of whiskers. "None of my kind can. It is ironic. We few survivors hide among you, attend your schools, work in your fields, and yet we do not know you at all. We cannot even see your dreams."

"It's just a machine."

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"Then why can we see nothing on it but a bright and shifting light?"

"I remember—" he began, almost dropped the thought, then caught the wind and sailed effortlessly forward—"I remember talking with a man who said that the picture does not exist. That the images are made in two parts and woven together within the brain."

"If that is so, then our brains must lack the loom, and we will never see your dreams." The creature licked its lips with a long, black tongue. The bureaucrat felt a sudden shiver of dread.

"This is madness," he said. "I cannot be talking with you."

"Why is that?"

"The last haunt died centuries ago."

"There are not many of us left, true. We were very near extinction before we learned how to survive in the interstices of your society. Physically altering our appearance was easy, of course. But passing as human, earning your money without attracting your interest is more of a challenge. We are forced to hide among the poor, in shanties at the edge of farmlands and shotgun flats in the worst parts of the Fan.

"Well, enough of that." Fox stood, offered his hand, raised the bureaucrat to his feet. He helped him into his jacket, and handed him his briefcase. "You must leave now. I really ought to kill you. But your conversation was so interesting, the early parts especially, that I will give you a short head start." He opened his mouth to show row upon row of sharp teeth.

"Run!" he said.

He had been running through the forest so long, crashing through tunnels of feathery arches, stumbling into towers of spiked and antlered tentacles that collapsed noiselessly about him, that it had become a steady state of existence, as natural and unquestionable as any other. Then it all melted about him and he was in a boneyard, among skeletons grown together and refleshed, ribcages growing fungal breasts, pelvises sprouting pale phalluses and incurvate vaginas. The dead were reborn as monsters, twins and triplets joined at hip and head, whole families overwhelmed by yeasting masses, a single skull peering up from the top, red-painted teeth agape as if it were either laughing or screaming.

Then that was gone too, and he was stumbling across flat, empty ground. Gasping, he stopped. The earth here was hard as stone. Nothing grew on it. To one side he could hear the excited water music of Cobbs Creek, in full flood and eager to merge with the river. This would be the dig site, he realized, a full eighth-mile square injected down to the bedrock with stabilizers after burying no fewer than three sealed navigation beacons in its heart, against the return of the land in a new age. He breathed convulsively, lungs afire. Was I running? he wondered, and felt the sudden dead weight of futility as he remembered that Undine was dead.

"I found him!" someone cried.

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A hand touched his shoulder, spun him around. Slowly he turned, and a fist struck his jaw.

He fell, legs sprawling out beneath him. His head smashed to the ground and his arms flew wide. With a vague, all-encompassing amazement he felt a booted foot crash into his ribs. "Whoof!" His breath fled out of him and he knew the grinding darkness of granite-boned earth turning under impact. Something loose and giving.

Three dark figures floated above him, shifting in planes of depth, movement defining and redefining their spatial relationship with each other and himself. One of them might have been a woman. He was too alert to possibilities, his attention too quick and darting, to be sure. They danced about him, images multiplying and leaving dark trails, until he was woven into a cage of enemies. "What," he croaked. "What do you want?"

His voice gonged and reverberated, coming deep and from a distance, like a vast drowned bell tolling from the bottom of the sea. The bureaucrat tried to raise his arms, but they responded oh so slowly. It was as if he were consciousness alone, seated within the head of a carved granite giant.

They beat him with a thousand fists, blows that rippled and overlapped, leaving pain in their wake. Then, abruptly, it was over. A round face, limned with witch-fire, floated into view.

Veilleur smiled down on him mockingly. "I told you there were ways and ways," he said. "Nobody ever takes me seriously, that's my problem."

He took up the briefcase.

"Come on," Veilleur said to the others. "I've got what we were after."

Then gone.

Time was a flickering grey fire constantly consuming all things, so that what appeared to be motion was actually the oxidation and reduction of possibility, the collapse of potential matter from grace to nothingness. The bureaucrat lay watching the total destruction of the universe for a long time. Perhaps he was unconscious, perhaps not. Whatever he was, it was a state of awareness he had never experienced before. He had nothing to compare it to. Could one be drugged-conscious and drugged-asleep? How would you know? The ground was hard, cold, damp under him. His coat was torn. He suspected that some of the dampness was his own blood. There were too many facts to deal with. Still, he knew he should be concerned about the blood. He clung to that island scrap of surety even as his thoughts spun dizzily around and around, lofting him high to show him the world and then slamming him down to begin the voyage again.

He dreamed that a creature came walking down the road. It had the body of a man and the head of a fox. It wore a tattered pair of dungarees.

Fox, if Fox it was, halted when he came to where the bureaucrat lay, and crouched beside him. That sharp-nosed face sniffed at his crotch, his chest, his head. "I'm bleeding," the bureaucrat said helpfully. Fox

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frowned down at him. Then that head swung away again, dissolving into the air.

He was whirled up into the ancient sky, thrown high as planets into old night and the void.

Seven: WHO IS THE BLACK BEAST?

The common room was dark and stuffy. Thick brocade curtains with tinsel-thread whales and roses choked out the afternoon sun. Floral pomanders sewn into the furniture failed to mask the smell of mildew; rots and growths were so quietly pervasive here that they seemed not decay but a natural progression, as if the hotel were slowly transforming itself from the realm of the artificial to that of the living.

"I won't see him," the bureaucrat insisted. "Send him away. Where are my clothes?"

Mother Le Marie placed soft, cool brown-spotted hands on his chest and forced him back down on the divan, more by embarrassment than actual force. "He'll be here any minute now. There's nothing you can do about it. Be still."

"I won't pay him." The bureaucrat felt weak and irritable, and strangely guilty, as if he had done something shameful the night before. The waterstained plaster ceiling liquified and flowed in his vision, its cracks and imperfections undulating like strands of seaweed. He squeezed his eyes shut for an instant. Nausea came and went in long, slow waves. His bowels felt loose.

"You don't have to." Le Marie tightened her jaw, a turtle trying to smile. "Doctor Orphelin will do the work as a favor to me."

In the hallway, the coffin-shaped coroner hummed gently to itself. One corner caught the light and glowed a pure and holy white. The bureaucrat forced himself to look away, found his gaze returning anyway. Two bored national police officers lounged against the wall, arms folded, staring into the television room. *Who was the father?* old Ahab roared. *I think I'm entitled to know.*

"I trust I have not grown so gullible as to consult a doctor," the bureaucrat said with dignity. "If I want medical attention, I shall employ the qualified machinery or, in extremis, a human with proper biomedical augmentation. But I will not swill down fermented swamp guzzle at the behest of some quasiliterate, uneducated charlatan."

"Be sensible. The nearest diagnostician is in Green Hill, while Doctor Orphelin is—"

"I am here."

He paused in the doorway, as if posing for a commemorative hologram: a lean man in a blue jacket of military cut with two rows of gold buttons. Then the worn white path down the middle of the carpet carried him past a rotting vacuum suit propped ornamentally against the bookcase,

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and he dumped his black bag alongside the divan. His hands were heavily tattooed.

"You have been drugged," the doctor said briskly, "and a diagnostician cannot help you. The medicinal properties of our native plants are not in its data base. Why should they be? Synthetics can do anything that natural drugs can, and they can be manufactured on the spot. But if you wish to understand what has happened to you, you must go not to one of your loathesome machines but to one such as I who has spent years studying such plants." He had a lean, ascetic face with high cheekbones and cold eyes. "I am going to examine you now. You are not required to heed a word of what I have to say. However, I insist on your cooperation in the examination."

The bureaucrat felt foolish. "Oh, very well."

"Thank you." Orphelin nodded to Mother Le Marie. "You may leave now."

The old woman looked startled, then offended. She raised her chin and walked stiffly out. *Why won't you tell your uncle who the father is?* someone said, and a young woman's agonized voice cried, *Because there* is *no father!* before it was muffled by the closing door.

Orphelin peeled back the bureaucrat's eyelids, shone a small light in his ears, took a scraping from inside his mouth and fed it to a diagnostick. "You should lose some weight," he remarked. "If you want, I can show you how to balance real and fairy foods in a diet." The bureaucrat stared stoically at a spray of pink silk roses, brittle and browning at the edges, and said nothing.

At last the examination ended. "Hum. Well, you shan't be surprised to learn that you've taken in some variety of neurotoxin. Could be any of a number of suspects. Did you experience hallucinations or illusions?"

"What's the difference?"

"An illusion is a misreading of actual sensory data, while an hallucination is seeing something that isn't there. Tell me what you saw last night. Just—" he held up a hand—" the high points, please. I have neither the time nor the patience for the extended story."

The bureaucrat told him about the giant women wading in the river.

"Hallucinations. Did you believe in their reality?"

He thought. "No. But they frightened me."

Orphelin smiled thinly. "You wouldn't be the first man with a fear of women. Oh be still, that was a joke. What else did you see?"

"I had a long talk with a fox-headed haunt. But that was real."

The doctor looked at him oddly. "Was it?"

"Oh yes. I'm quite sure of it. He carried me back to the hotel, later."

Nausea welled up again and the room took on a heightened clarity and vividness. He could see every thread of fiber on the rug, every frayed fabric end on the divan crawling in his vision. He felt flushed, and the finger that Undine had tattooed burned.

There was a rap on the door.

"Yes?" the bureaucrat said.

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Chu stuck her head in and said, "Excuse me, but the autopsy is complete, and we need you to accept the report."

"Come in here, please," Orphelin said. "And I'll need somebody else as well." Chu glanced at the bureaucrat and then, when he shrugged, ducked into the hall. She spoke to the guards. The taller one shook his head. "Hold on," she said. A minute later she returned with Mintouchian in tow. He looked more hound than man, his face puffy and pink, his eyes sad and bloodshot.

"There's more to this than I had originally thought." The doctor held out his arms. "Grasp me by the wrists and hold on as tightly as possible." Chu took one arm, Mintouchian the other. "Pull! We're not here to hold hands."

They obeyed, and he slowly leaned forward, letting his head loll on his chest. The two had to struggle to hold him upright.

Orphelin's head whipped up, face transformed. His eyes were wide open, startlingly white. They quivered slightly. He parted his lips and a third eye glared out from his mouth.

"Krishna!" Mintouchian gasped. All three eyes glanced toward him, then dismissively away. Horrified, the bureaucrat stared into that cold third eye.

Orphelin stared unblinkingly back. That eerie triple gaze drove like a spike deep into the bureaucrat's skull. For a long moment nobody breathed.

Then the doctor's head collapsed on his chest again.

"All right," he said calmly. "You can let go now." They obeyed. "Have you ever considered spiritual training?" he asked.

The bureaucrat felt as if he'd just emerged from a dream. It seemed impossible now, what he had just seen. "I beg your pardon?"

"First off, the entity you spoke with was not a haunt, attractive though that notion might seem to you. The last haunt died in captivity in lesser year 143 of the first great year after the landing. What you saw was an avatar of one of their spirits. The one we call the Fox. It is an important natural power, though unreliable in certain aspects, and is generally taken as being an auspicious omen."

"I spoke with a solid, living being. He was neither ghost nor hallucination." The room was alive now, each strand of carpeting undulating in unseen currents, mottled light dancing on the ceiling.

"Perhaps," Mintouchian offered, "you spoke with a man in a mask."

Nausea made the bureaucrat snappish. "Nonsense. What would a man in a fox mask be doing out in the woods in the middle of the night?"

Chu stroked her mustache. "He could have been waiting for you. I really think we should consider the possibility that he was part of this elaborate game that Gregorian is playing with us."

The doctor looked startled. "Gregorian?"

"I studied offplanet," Orphelin said when the others had been dismissed. "Many years ago. I had a Midworlds scholarship." His back was

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to the bureaucrat; he had not spoken until the door was well and fully closed. "Six of the most miserable years of my life were spent in the Laputa Extension. The people who hand out the grants never consider what it's like to go from an artificially suppressed level of technology to one of the floating worlds."

"What does this have to do with Gregorian?"

Orphelin looked around for a seat, settled wearily down. His face was stiff and grey. "That was how I met Gregorian."

"You were friends, then?" Whenever the bureaucrat looked at Orphelin's face too long the flesh melted away layer by layer, and the skull rose grinning to the surface. Only by regularly glancing away could he banish the vision.

"No, of course not." The doctor gazed sightlessly at a dusty crucifix ringed by a small collection of sepia flats. His clasped hands rested upon his knees. "I despised him on sight.

"We met in the dueling halls of the Puzzle Palace. Suicide was nominally illegal, but the authorities winked at it—training grounds for leadership and so on. He had a coterie of admirers listening to him talk about control theory and the biological effects of projective chaos weapons. A striking young man, charismatically self assured. He had a bad reputation. His skin was pale and he wore the offworld jewelry that was popular back then: Bloodstones embedded in the fingers, bands of silver around the wrists with the veins routed through crystal channels."

"Yes, I remember that style," the bureaucrat said. "Expensive, as I recall."

Orphelin shrugged. "It was his popularity that most offended me. I was a material phenomenologist. So while Gregorian could freely discuss what *he* was learning, my education was very strictly controlled and I wasn't allowed to take any of it out of class. What status I had in student circles came from my having studied under a pharmacienne before I came to Laputa. Oh, I was their trained ape all right! Dressed all in black with saltmouse skulls and feather fetishes hung on the fringes. I played suicide not so much for the prestige of winning, but to brush fingertips against death—morbid shock was much more common than anyone ever let on. I made dark hints that I won because I had occult powers. And Gregorian burst out laughing at the sight of me! Did you ever play suicide?"

The bureaucrat hesitated. "Once . . . I was young."

"Then I don't have to tell you that it's a rigged game. Anyone foolish enough to play by the rules is going to lose. I had mastered the standard means of cheating—tapping in extra data sources, relaying your opponent's signal through a millisecond delay circuit, all the usual—and enjoyed a local reputation as a mind warrior. But Gregorian beat me three times running. I had a mistress, an Inner Circle bitch with those aristocratic near-abstract features that take three generations of intensive gene reworking to achieve. He humiliated me in front of her and his father and what few friends I had."

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"You met his father? What was he like?"

"I have no idea. It was edited out before we left the halls. His father was somebody important who couldn't afford to be connected with the games. All I remember of him was that he was there.

"A year later I returned home to the Tidewater with Gregorian beside me. We shared a room at my parents' hotel as if we were close friends. By then, antipathy had blossomed into hatred. We'd agreed to have a wizard's duel—three questions each, winner take all.

"The night we went in search of the maddrake root was wet and starless. We dug by the pauper's boneyard, where we would not be disturbed. Gregorian straightened first, hands all mud. I have it, he said. He snapped the root in two and held it to my nose. Maddrake has a distinctive odor. It was only after I had swallowed my half that—that smile of his! —it occurred to me that he might have rubbed his hands with maddrake sap and offered instead the halfaman root which is a close cousin but can be counteracted with a simple antidote. Too late. I had to trust him. We waited until the trees burned green to their cores and the wind spoke. Let us begin, I said.

"Gregorian leaped up and walked through the bones with his arms out, making the skeletons rattle. They were not well maintained, of course. The paint was faded, and half the bones had fallen to the ground so that we trod them underfoot. The death-forces flowed up from them and crawled under my skin, and that made me bold. I felt strong with death. Turn and face me, I commanded. Or are you afraid?

"He turned and to my horror I saw that he had taken on the aspect of Crow. His head was huge and black: Black beak, black feathers, bright obsidian eyes. There was that little bristle of hairlike feathers at the base of the beak, the narrow nostril slits halfway to its point. I had never seen a spirit invoked before. That's one question, he said in Crow's harsh voice. No, I am not.

"I assumed this was all illusion, an effect of the maddrake. Angrily, I strode forward and seized his arms. The little deaths flowed into him and fought beneath his skin, so that his muscles writhed and spasmed. I squeezed. I was strong then, you must know. My grip should have choked off the blood and left his arms paralyzed. The death-forces should have killed him. But he shook my hands away effortlessly, and laughed.

"You cannot overpower Crow with your little tricks.

"How did you know I was seeing Crow? I asked. Feeling that horror which comes on realizing that one is completely out of his depth.

"That's two questions. Crow stropped his beak against a nearby skull, setting the whole skeleton aswing. I know all about you. I have an informant who tells me everything. The Black Beast.

"Who is the Black Beast? I cried.

"That's three questions. Crow poked his beak into a skull socket, teased out some small sweetmeat. I have answered two of them and now it is my turn. First tell me: What does it mean when I say Miranda is black?

"I was angry at how he'd tricked the questions from me, but the duel's

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purpose is to test will against will; it had been fairly done. An inch down, I said, all the world-globe is an egg of blackness. Starlight does not touch it; only Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban contend for influence. Mystery is that close. This was all catechism, you see, baby stuff, and so I regained much of my confidence. As beneath the skull the brain is black. The magician understands this and contends for influence.

"Crow ruffled his feathers, then parted his beak as he threw back some dark gristly bit. That black tongue! What are the black constellations?

"They are the shapes formed by the starless spaces between the bright constellations. The uninitiated cannot see them and believe they do not exist, but once pointed out they cannot be forgotten. They are emblematic of the mysteries anyone can master but few realize exist.

"Crow poked about among the teeth with the tip of his beak. I'd offer you a maggot, he said, but there are barely enough here for me. One last question. Who is the Black Beast?

"What do you mean? I said angrily. I asked you that same question and you wouldn't answer me. I don't believe in your Black Beast at all.

"Crow threw his head back then and screamed in triumph. Those beady little eyes were dark novae of malice. He spread out thumb and forefinger and said, you are that long erect. Your mistress was once involved in the Committee for the Liberation of Information, and only her mother's money hushed up the scandal. You suspect she is unfaithful to you because she says nothing of your own infidelities. You wet the bed long into your adolescence—you wound up apprenticed to your pharmacienne after she cured your bladder problem. The Black Beast has told me all about you. The Black Beast is someone very near to you. You trust the Black Beast, but you should not. The Beast is not your friend but mine.

"And he walked away. I shouted after him that our duel was not over, that there had been no clear winner. But he was gone. I told my parents he had been called away."

Doctor Orphelin sighed. "Gregorian disappeared from my life. Perhaps he transferred to another extension. But I could not get his question out of my mind. Who was the Black Beast? What false friend had told Gregorian my secrets? One morning I woke to find a drawing of a crow in flight tacked up on the wall. I awoke my mistress, pointed to it. What is that? I demanded.

"A picture of a bird, she said.

"What does it mean?

"It's just a picture, she said. You never objected to it before. She put a hand on my arm. I knocked it away. It wasn't there yesterday, I said. She was baffled and began to cry. Are you the Black Beast? I asked her. Are you?

"I could not read that sleek face of hers. That complex and all but noseless plane whose geometries I would trace by the hour with finger, tongue and eye, now seemed a mask to me. What could lie behind it? I set her various traps. I asked her sudden questions. I accused her of impossibilities.

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"She left me.

"But the Black Beast did not. I was expelled from Laputa for dueling. I came home to find a stuffed crow on the center of the dinner table. A big, jeering thing, with wings outspread. Nobody in his right mind would put such a thing where people ate. What does this mean? I asked. My mother thought I was joking. Who put this here? I demanded. She stammered guiltily. I overturned the table, screaming, how could you do this to me?

"My father said I was raving and should apologize. I called him a senile old fool. We had a fight and I split open his head. He had to go all the way to Port Deposit for treatment. My parents disowned me, and sued to remove my patronymic. I had to take on a new name.

"Who was the Black Beast? I was obsessed. I had lost my family; now I gave up my friends. Better to live alone than with a traitor at my back. Still, the Black Beast taunted me. I would wake up to find my chest covered with black feathers. Or I would receive a letter from Gregorian telling me things no one could know. I had dreams. Strangers passing through told painful stories from childhood, secrets from my affairs.

"It was maddening.

"There came a day when my isolation was complete, my life shattered, my ambition gone. I lived alone in a hut by the salt marshes. Still the Black Beast left his sign. I would return from gathering herbs to find the word CROW scrawled above my bed. I would hear the cries of crows in the middle of the night. Mocking laughter followed me down the street. Finally I was driven to contemplate killing myself, just to get it over with. I held the knife to my heart and carefully judged the angle of thrust.

"Then the door opened—it should have been locked but it opened anyway —and Gregorian stood before me. He grinned down at my fear, all teeth and malice, and said, surrender.

"So I bowed down to him. He took me to a star-shaped room in the Puzzle Palace with a vaulted ceiling where five great wooden beams came together, and between them was blue plaster with gilt stars. There he copied from me what herblore I held—it was all he valued of what I knew—and cut away the bulk of my emotions, leaving me little more than the grey capacity for regret. And when I was no conceivable rival to him any more, I asked the question, the one that had ruined my life: Who was the Black Beast?

"He leaned forward and whispered in my ear.

"You are, he said."

With sudden energy Orphelin stood and snapped shut his bag. "My diagnosis is that you were given three drops of tincture of angelroot. It is an intensive hallucinogen that leaves the user open to spiritual influences at the height of its action, but has no serious aftereffects. You're experiencing a touch of vitamin depletion. Have Mother Le Marie cook up a plate of yams and you'll be fine."

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"Wait! Are you saying that Gregorian tapped your agent in the Puzzle Palace?" It was rare, but it happened, the bureaucrat knew. "Was that the forfeit when you lost to him in suicide?"

"You would believe that, of course," Orphelin said. "I know your type. Your eyes were closed long ago." He opened the door, unmuffling screams from the room across the hall.

Mother Le Marie stood just outside, back to them, staring through the door at a badly bruised woman lying unconscious on the floor. On the screen a door opened and a figure entered. Mother Le Marie gaped. "Now there's a character I never thought they would actually show."

"What, you mean the mermaid?"

"No, no, the offworlder. Look—Miriam's had a miscarriage and he's arrived too late. But he's put the child in biostasis and now he's taking it to the Upper World to be healed and brought to term. It's going to live forever now. You can bet the offworlder's going to give his bastard that ray treatment."

"That's nonsense. Immortality? The technology simply doesn't exist."

"Not down here it doesn't."

The bureaucrat felt a thrill of horror. She believes this, he thought. They all do. They actually believe that the knowledge exists to keep them alive forever and that it's being withheld from them.

Orphelin took a pamphlet from a coat pocket. "I advise that you read this and think seriously about its implications."

The bureaucrat accepted it, looked at the title. *The Anti-Man.* Curious, he opened it at random and read: "All affections and bonds of the will are reduced to two, namely aversion and desire, or hatred and love. Yet hatred itself is reduced to love, whence it follows that the will's only bond is Eros." Odd. He flipped to the credit page.

A. Gregorian

Angrily, he crushed the pamphlet in his hand. "Gregorian sent you to me! Why? What does he want of me?"

"Would you believe it?" Orphelin said. "I have not seen Gregorian from that day onward. Yet I constantly find myself doing his work. A magician does not send messages, you know—he orchestrates reality. I do not enjoy being forced into his games, and I cannot tell you what he wants of you because I do not know. One thing I do know, however: You have a Black Beast of your own. The two people who were here, the ones who held me? One of them gave you the drug last night."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Suicide is a stupid game, isn't it?" Orphelin said. "I thought I was good at it, but Gregorian was better."

He left.

Mother Le Marie watched him go. Behind her, the bureaucrat could see the autopsy machine, silent now that it had done analyzing Undine's arm. The sun had shifted and left it in shadow.

"Tell me," Mother Le Marie said. "Did my . . . did the doctor give you good service?"

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He caught the hesitation, and thought of Orphelin's estrangement from his parents, of his change of name, of the fact that he was the son of hoteliers. And he knew he should tell her yes, that her son had been of enormous help to him. But he could not.

After a while the old woman left.

One of the nationals put a white chit in his hand. "The autopsy results," she said. "One woman, a bit past her prime, in good health, tattooed. Drowned almost exactly one day ago. Is this acceptable to you?"

The bureaucrat nodded heavily.

"Good." She slipped on a signet ring and they shook hands. He returned the chit and she turned away. The other national began wheeling the machine away and the bureaucrat realized that he would never see Undine again. When he closed his eyes he could smell her mouth and feel the light electric shock when her lips first touched his. That instant would never leave him. Gregorian had set his hooks, and now the magician stood far away and played him on hair-thin lines. Tugging him first one way, then another. Orphelin had spoken of the star chamber. It must have been at Gregorian's behest he had done so.

The bureaucrat knew the star chamber well. He was one of three people who had keys to it.

He looked down at the pamphlet, still clutched in his hands, and in a fit of revulsion, tore it in two and flung the pieces on the floor.

There was a bustling noise outside, shouts of fear and astonishment. Old man Le Marie materialized on the stairs. "What's that?" he said querulously. "Ain't he gone yet?" One or two boarders peered from their rooms without coming out. Nobody emerged from the television room. Curious, the bureaucrat glanced in and saw Mintouchian asleep on the couch. Save for him the room was empty, a blaring void at the center of the house.

Mother Le Marie opened the front door and gasped. Fresh air and sunlight gushed in. Wrapping the blanket more tightly about himself, the bureaucrat peered dizzily over the old woman's shoulder.

An insect-like metal creature walked daintily down the street on three spindly legs.

It was his briefcase.

Tilted up on one corner, the briefcase looked like nothing so much as an enormous spider. Away from the machine-saturated environs of deep space, it seemed a monstrosity, an alien visitor from some demon universe. People skittered back from it. Unmolested, it walked to the hotel. It climbed the steps and then, retracting its legs, laid itself down at the bureaucrat's feet.

"Well, boss," it said. "I had one hell of a time getting back to you."

The bureaucrat leaned to pick it up. There was a scurry of motion to one side, and he turned to face three men shouldering broadcast machines.

"Sir!" one said. "A word with you."

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The form-giver placed the bureaucrat at the bottom of the Spanish Steps, and set his briefcase down beside him.

The briefcase was incarnated as a short, monkish man, half human stature. He had shaggy black eyebrows and a slightly harassed expression. His grey velvet jacket was rumpled, his shoulders hunched and distracted.

"Ready to do battle?" the bureaucrat asked sourly.

The briefcase looked up with a quick, lopsided smile and alert eyes. "Will we be starting at your desk, boss?"

"No, I think we'd best start at the wardrobe. Considering all we've got to get done."

The briefcase nodded and led him upward. The marble stairs split and resplit, winding graceful as snakes through the preliminary decision branchings. Swiftly they ascended the hierarchies. In the upper reaches, the stairs twisted and turned sideways to each other as they multiplied, fanning out into impossible tangles that looped like Moebius strips and Escher solids before disappearing into the higher dimensions. Always local orientation kept the stairs underfoot. Away at the limits of vision new stairs split away from the old as new portals were created.

Involuntarily the bureaucrat thought of the old joke, that the Puzzle Palace had a million doors not a one of which took you anywhere you wanted to be.

"Through here." Their path corkscrewed under a spiraling cluster of stairways and between a brace of stone lions, muzzles splashed with green paint. They opened a door and stepped within.

The wardrobe was a musty oak room lined with masks of demons, heroes, creatures from other star systems, and things which might be any of these. It was gently lit by the pervasive sourceless light that informed all the Puzzle Palace, and filled with the purposeful bustle of people trying on costumes or having their faces painted, a quiet place of hushed preparation lifted from some prestellar theater or media surround.

A mantislike construct approached, all polished green chitin and slim articulation. It placed forearms together and bowed deeply. "How may I assist you, master? Talents, censors, social armaments? Some extra memory, perhaps."

"Agent me in five," the bureaucrat said. His briefcase, sitting cross-legged atop a costume trunk, took a pad from an inside pocket, scribbled payment codes, ripped off the top sheet and handed it to the construct.

"Very good." The mantis lifted four mannequins from a cupboard, and began taking his measurements. "Shall I limit their autonomy?"

"What would be the point?"

"That's very wise, sir. It's remarkable how many people restrict the amount of information their agents can carry. Amazing blindness. Because simply to *exist* here means one has given up one's secrets to an

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agent. People are so superstitious. They hang on to the fiction of self, they treat the Puzzle Palace as if it were a place rather than an agreed-upon set of conventions within which people may meet and interact."

"Why are you annoying me like this?" The bureaucrat understood the conventions quite well; he was an agent of those conventions and their defender. He might regret that Gregorian's secrets, embedded as they were in the warp and woof of human meeting space, could not be extracted. But he understood why this must be.

The mantis bent over a mannequin. "I am only acting out of concern, sir. You are in a state of emotional distress. You are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the limits that are placed on you." It adjusted the height, plumped out the belly.

"Am I?" the bureaucrat asked in surprise.

The mannequins roughed out, the mantis began molding the bureaucrat's features onto their faces. "Who would know better than I? If you would care to discuss—"

"Oh, shut up."

"Of course, sir. The privacy laws are paramount. They come before even common sense," the construct said reprovingly. The briefcase stood watching, an amused half-smile on his face.

"It's not as if I were a Free Informationist."

"Even if you were," the mantis said, "I wouldn't be able to report you. If treason were reportable, no one could trust the Puzzle Palace. Who could work here?" It stepped back from its work. "Ready."

Five bureaucrats now looked at each other, all perfect copies of the other, face to face and eye to eye. Reflexively—and this was a tic that never failed to bother the bureaucrat—they looked away from each other with faint expressions of embarrassment.

"I'll tackle Korda," the bureaucrat said.

"I'll take the bottle shop."

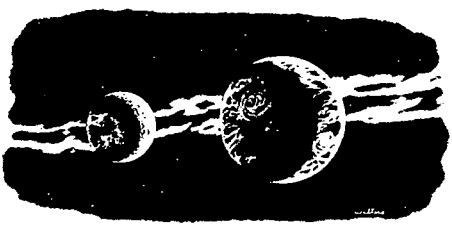
"Philippe."

"The map room."

"The Outer Circle."

The mantis produced a mirror. One by one, the bureaucrat stepped through.

CONCLUDED IN NEXT ISSUE



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NEXT ISSUE

As I write this, *IAsfm* has won the *Locus* Poll as Best Science Fiction Magazine of the Year yet again, and next issue we kick off *another* year of top-of-the-line, State of the Art *IAsfm* stories with a January issue jampacked with some of the top talent in the business.

Our dramatic January cover illustrates a scene from the second and final installment of **Michael Swanwick's** pyrotechnic new novel, *Stations of the Tide.* The bureaucrat and his faithful briefcase are closing in on the sinister and immensely dangerous wizard Gregorian, who has taken refuge in the ruins of the fabled lost city of Ararat, somewhere in the doomed Tidelands of the mysterious planet Miranda. But the Great Year is turning, and the awesome Jubilee Tides are about to thunder south, sweeping everything before them. Can the bureaucrat find and somehow defeat Gregorian, against all the odds, before the immense, world-swallowing wave of the Jubilee Tides crashes over the top of the tower of Ararat? Why am I asking *you*? After all, *I* already know—it's time for *you* to read the last installment of this major new novel from one of science fiction's brightest new stars, and find out for yourself! Speaking of bright new stars, **James Patrick Kelly** is also on hand for January, taking us from the depths of space to near-future New Hampshire, for a compelling and powerful tale of the age-old war between the young and the old, in the unsettling "Pogrom." Kelly's wild novella "Mr. Boy" was one of our major stories in 1990, and "Pogrom" is sure to be one of this year's most talked-about stories as well.

ALSO IN JANUARY: new writer **Michael Kallenberger** makes a brilliant *IAsfm* debut with an intricate study of quantum uncertainties and the secrets of the human heart, in "White Chaos"; Hugo-winner (and recent two-time *IAsfm* Reader's Award-winner) **Lawrence Watt-Evans** returns to give us a "One-Shot" punch that will shock your eyes wide open; hot new writer **Kathe Koja** returns to give us some very unusual flying lessons, in the wry and offbeat "Bird Superior"; **Steven Utley** takes us on an unsettling and dangerous tour of some Civil War battlefields, in the hard-hitting "Where or When"; new writer **Kathleen Ann Goonan** also makes an impressive *IAsfm* debut, dazzling us with the subtle and poignant story of a woman who's been "Wanting to Talk to You," with some unexpected results; and Hugo- and World Fantasy Award-winner **Avram Davidson** returns to regale us with the distressing saga—stop laughing!—of the "Death of A Damned Good Man." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our January issue on sale on your newsstands on December 11, 1990.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Wrenewal

A Gift Upon the Shore
By M. K. Wren
Ballantine, $18.95

It's a truism that there is almost no such thing as chamber science fiction. By its very nature, SF must almost always be worldshaking, dealing with the fate of a culture, a race, a planet, a universe. Few of these novels are about ordinary people doing unmonumental things. (The comparable case for fantasy is interestingly different, but there's no room to go into that here.)

The one exception has been the postnuclear holocaust novel, where often the focus has been on a few people merely surviving. The background, of course, is a major event (the end of civilization), but the story itself need not be. This is a somewhat neglected subgenre these days; its main manifestation of late has been the usually violence-exploitative "survivalist" novel. But curiously enough, for the second month in a row we have a return to a type of novel we haven't seen for a while. Last month it was the "first trip to Mars story" (albeit with a twist—Terry Bisson's *Voyage To the Red Planet*); this month it's the "few brave people trying to preserve some semblance of civilization after a nuclear war story," M. K. Wren's *A Gift Upon the Shore*. (Something could be made, perhaps, of a shift of values from the violence-ridden survivalist subgenre to a more positive approach such as is shown here, but one swallow does not . . .)

M. K. Wren's "Phoenix Trilogy" of a few years back was a complex, multigenerational interstellar melodrama that didn't come close to receiving the praise or readership it deserved. *A Gift Upon the Shore* is anything but complex, even though it's a story that alternates between two time periods. One is some decades after the nuclear war, and centers around a small colony which is built around a subsistence farm called Amarna in what was Washington state. It is, if not thriving, at least surviving fairly comfortably, with seven adults and six children. In flashback, we are told by Mary Hope, an old woman who is the teacher of the children, how she and the original owner of the farm, an artist named Rachel, lived through the events which resulted in the end of civilization.

Rachel had taken Mary in when she had been injured by one of the roving gangs of thugs in the anarchy which prevailed in the U.S. in the near future. The nuclear war which occurred soon after may seem

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unlikely in this era of lessening tensions, but as Wren points out, lessening tensions do not mean lessening population, and she cites the kind of madness that develops in animal studies when a confined population increases past a crucial point. Rachel and Mary survive by the sheerest of accidents, and barely make it through the nuclear winter and the "Blind Summer" which follows, as too much ultraviolet penetrates the atmosphere. For ten years they don't see another human being, but then a young man stumbles onto their farm. He is from a larger group of survivors to the south, and has been sent in search of other human beings. As it happens, his group, "the Ark," consists of religious fundamentalists. Mary and Rachel have decided that their mission is to preserve every scrap of knowledge of every sort that they can, in the form of every book they can gather. Thus is set up the basic conflict of the story, which extends through both time periods which it covers.

And so, against the background of an epic event, a small scaled drama unfolds, involving a bare handful of people. Its eventual outcome, of course, could well be the preservation of human knowledge, but this doesn't lie within the scope of the story, which is one of ideas and character. As such, it is beautifully done. This book is not for those devoted only to interstellar war and saving the universe.

Several additional notes. Nowhere in the text, so far as I can tell, is the name of the farm, Amarna, explained; it is the modern name of the ancient site of Pharaoh Akhenaton's capital city. On the inside of the dust jacket of the hardcover edition of *A Gift Upon the Shore* is a list of some of the books preserved by Mary and Rachel. And ascribed to Rachel is a thought I find all too apropos for today: "One of the most profound tragedies of human existence is to live at the end of a golden age . . . and know it."

Earthsea Farewell

Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea
By Ursula K. Le Guin
Atheneum, $15.95

Anne McCaffrey is generally and probably correctly credited with saving the dragon from its age-old Smaug or St. George and . . . image, and making it into an acceptable, if slightly terrifying, member of society. However, other people may share with me the memory of Ursula K. Le Guin's dragons of Earthsea, from her fantasy trilogy now over twenty years old, as the earliest Western examples of the Chinese concept of the most wise and ancient of beings.

That, as a matter of fact, is about all I remembered of the Earthsea trilogy, when I ventured into Le Guin's *Tehanu*, which she subtitled "The Last Book of Earthsea." I might have done better to go back and reread the trilogy (I can but plead the press of time, the bane of all periodical column writers);

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though the story itself is crystal clear, I think that I missed much of the subtler resonance of the book from not being up on the others.

The protagonist is Tenar, the heroine of *The Tombs of Atuan*, twenty-five years after the events of that book (the second of the trilogy). As one might expect from a Le Guin heroine, she—ex-priestess of Atuan, the White Lady who had worn the ring of Erreth-Akbe on her wrist, who had made whole the Rune of Peace with the help of the Archmage Ged—had married a farmer and settled down to a peaceful existence on one of the less prominent islands of Earthsea. She is now a prosperous widow with a married daughter and a roving seafarer of a son, whose placid existence has been disturbed first by the finding of a cruelly maimed girl child, raped and then thrown into a fire, whom she had adopted, and second, by a summons to the deathbed of Ogion, the Mage of Re Albi, her old teacher, in a distant village.

The world of Earthsea itself is undergoing great changes; there seems to be a creeping anarchy both in society and in the science of magic so important in this universe; spells of the mighty as well as those of the minor village witches seem to be going awry. Tenar takes the maimed child Therru with her to Ogion, and after the mage's death, she stays on in his house. Then suddenly the Archmage Ged (aka Sparrowhawk, the hero of the trilogy), is almost literally dumped on her doorstep by a dragon. The Archmage is aging, weak, and has lost his powers—this is apparently directly subsequent to the end of the third book.

What happens is certainly more than a postscript to the trilogy; it is perhaps a necessary dénouement for an author for whom "and they lived happily ever afterward" is a bit too simple even for a high fantasy. In any case, it is as graceful and involving as the other Earthsea books, or, for that matter, as any of Ms. Le Guin's incomparable work.

On the Navahopi Rez

Cyber Way
By Alan Dean Foster
Ace, $4.50 (paper)

Alan Dean Foster's *Cyber Way* combines several disparate elements most interestingly. First there's a next-century background which is smoothly drawn and convincing without being intrusive; it is actually a background and not the point of the novel, as is so often the case. And while it has its problems—some major ones, in fact—it is not one of the *futures noirs* that we have become all too used to in the past few years.

The reason that it's a background and not the *raison d'être* of the story is that *Cyber Way* is a murder mystery, practically a classic one, with a good ol' boy, overweight Southern detective in search of the murderer of a very rich, very powerful South Florida business man/art collector, who was killed on his more-than-secure island es-

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tate. The body was found with that of his housekeeper, and the ruins of a Navajo sand painting.

. . . Which leads us to the third major element of the book—the Navajo culture, particularly its mysticism as applied to, and read through, the religious art form of the sand painting. The "Way" of the book's title refers to the Navajo Ways, ceremonies involving the balance of the universe and using chants and paintings. And the sand painting at the murder scene leads Moody, our detective hero, cross-country to the Navajo reservation, which has become a major phenomenon, economically—due to the special tax laws governing Indian reservations—and culturally. (The depiction of this future "Navahopi Rez" is an intriguing and inspired bit of extrapolation.) Here he teams up with a Navajo police officer, who is convinced that the painting and its possible mystical properties are at the bottom of the crime, much to the disgust of the pragmatic white detective.

Now as it's a mystery, both murder and science fictional, there's not too much more that can be said, though just to tantalize, perhaps we can drop the fact that when a reproduction of the sand painting (made decades ago, mind you, on a pattern centuries old) is put through a computer, it explodes, figuratively into an astonishing display of fractal patterns, and literally, burning down the police station. It is, in fact, an interstitial alien database.

The genres of SF and the murder mystery are difficult to combine, as many people have pointed out; one reason is that the mystery novel tends toward the small scale (the fate of only two individuals, the victim and the murderer) while, as noted above, SF almost always tends toward the cosmic. *Cyber Way* ends up as true SF, since Foster guides the resolutions of its mysteries toward the cosmic. On the way, he shows an impressive knowledge of Navajo lore.

What?

Tigana
By Guy Gavriel Kay
Roc Books, $18.95

The interesting thing about the title of Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana* is that it's a word—a name, in fact—that most of the characters in the book can't remember. In fact, they can't even hear it when it's said to them. It is, or *was*, a small country on "the Palm," a peninsula something like a northward-pointing Italy, an Italy of, say, the Renaissance consisting of nine squabbling states. The Palm has been conquered and divided by two powers, Alberico, a sorcerer-warrior from the Empire of Barbadior to the east, and Brandin the sorcerer king of Ygrath, to the west.

The small principality of Tigana has made the mistake of defeating and killing Brandin's son, sent against them in what was to be an easy campaign for the untried boy. Brandin has exacted a horrendous vengeance, not only demolishing

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Tigana's cities, but through sorcery he's erased the name of the country from the minds and memories of all save the survivors of its ruination. The story is of several of those survivors almost two decades later: a youth whose refugee parents had never told him of Tigana; a young woman whose father had fled *before* the fighting had begun and who feels the need to make reparation for his cowardice; the heir of Tigana, only a boy when catastrophe struck and now waging a sort of guerrilla warfare; a brother and sister, separated, he falling in with the heir, she working her way up to becoming head of Brandin's *saishan* (harem) in her slow and subtle quest for revenge and the restoration of her country.

The goal for all of these characters, of course, is not only the defeat of the conquerors (both must be vanquished, since Alberico will take over the Palm entirely if only Brandin is defeated), but the lifting of the spell which has wiped out the name of Tigana. The tale of how they go about it is a long and complicated one, and almost consistently involving and well paced. But there are surprisingly few fantasy elements in this fantasy world; magic is not a major factor in its workings despite the presence of the sorcerer-conquerors and some wizards of lesser powers. A nonhuman character, a "riselka," plays a small (though important) part in the story, and the finale is indeed a duel of sorcery. But for the most part, *Tigana* involves the reader through its neat plotting and an array of characters of more than usual depth and variety.

Double Bas

The Jewel of Bas
By Leigh Brackett
Thieves' Carnival
By Karen Haber
Tor, $3.50 (paper)

Long time readers will know that it's highly unlikely that there should be such a thing as a reprint of a work by Leigh Brackett that would pass unnoticed in this space. The reason is simple—her stories are classics still eminently readable today nearly a half-century after publication. And yet it's a curious fact that Brackett's contribution to SF is very hard to define.

Back when she began writing, just before mid-century, the standard for science fiction was the planet-hopping, world-saving hero, as enshrined in the novels of E. E. Smith et al. (and probably most remembered today by two heroes who entered cultural mythology via the comics, Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon). And don't get me wrong—great fun those adventures were, too. But then the mutations in the field started. Best known of all, of course, were the stable of geniuses being fostered in *Astounding*, and their astonishing concepts (such as extrapolating sociology as a hard science). And from another direction came the humanistic voices of such writers as Ray Bradbury, who actually wrote stories about the ecological

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spoilage of the Martian landscape. Ms. Brackett's stories were less easy to classify as revolutionary. The science was hardly hard, and the humanistic concerns were more sensual than ecological. But there was a usage of science fictional devices that was mysterious, poetic and dreamlike, and about as far from Smith's hearty, world-saving heroics as you could get. Moreover, her characters were much more likely to be thieves and vagabonds than heroes. For instance, the two protagonists of "The Jewel of Bas" are a female thief and her minstrel consort, adrift in a mysterious never-dark world (the horizon of which goes up) lit by floating "sunballs." We learn that it was created by a legendary "god" called Bas, who is served by two androids; all three came from a strange world of blue skies, one sun, and a downward turning horizon. All this is sung about by the minstrel, but is pure legend to the world's inhabitants at this point. In less than a hundred pages, we learn the history of this strange place, where the creator Bas really came from, and see the world saved by the thief and the minstrel. As you can see, Brackett foreshadowed the current style of science fiction that is more than a little tinged with fantasy, an almost unique and individual flavor in her day but now commonplace. In her hands, however, it is still anything but.

This reprint of *The Jewel of Bas* is one of those "double" paperbacks, in which an older work is published with a recently written story linked with it in some way. In this case it is Karen Haber's new "prequel" to *The Jewel of Bas*; one can only politely say that in no way save in a certain similarity of names and settings does it share any of the qualities of the Brackett story.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . Some neatly packaged collections have recently appeared. *The Complete Stories of Robert Bloch, Volume 1* and *Can Such Things Be? Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* by Ambrose Bierce are the first in a new line of handsome trade paperbacks (Citadel Twilight, $12.95 and $6.95 respectively) . . . And a collection of early stories by Arthur C. Clarke (including the lovely "The Lion of Comarre") called *Tales from Planet Earth* is illustrated by Michael Whelan (Bantam, $9.95, paper) . . . *The Pendragon Chronicles,* edited by Mike Ashley, are short stories about Arthur and the Matter of Britain, from authors as varied as Joy Chant, John Brunner, and John Steinbeck (Peter Bedrick Books, $18.95).

Reprints etc. . . . Stephen King's *The Stand* has been republished —with an additional 150,000 words that weren't in the first version (!!) (Doubleday, $24.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 2100 St. Denis #10, Montreal, P.Q., H2K 3K7, Canada ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Here comes the Thanksgiving con(vention) rush, followed by the holiday lull. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and say what it's for). Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.

NOVEMBER 1990

16-18—**PhilCon.** For info, write: **Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101.** Or call **(215) 342-1672** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests include: Fritz Leiber, Frank Kelly-Freas. At the Adam's Mark Hotel, City Ave. & Monument Rd.

16-18—**The Leonard Nimoy Con. (01) 997-7755 (London).** Nottingham UK. Mr. Nimoy won't be there.

23-25—**LosCon. (818) 760-9234.** Buena Park Hotel. The big annual LArea con; about 1,500 expected.

23-25—**Darkover Grand Council. (202) 737-4609.** Holiday Inn, Timonium (Baltimore) MD. MZBradley.

23-25—**SiliCon. (408) 933-0140 or (408) 377-3266.** Some gaming and media emphasis, but also SF.

23-25—**Australian National Media Con.** Diplomat Motor Inn, St. Kilda (Melbourne) NSW, Australia.

23-25—**British TV Celebration.** O'Hare Hyatt, Chicago IL. Dr. Who, Blake's 7, Robin Hood guests.

23-25—**Fantasy Fair. (214) 349-3367.** Marriott Park Central, Dallas TX. Each of these two cons . . .

23-25—**Creation. (516) SHOWMAN.** Penta Hotel, New York NY. . . . is the big annual blowout for their respective commercial corporations, each of which runs many cons during the year. I only list these big ones, since the stress of all is heavily on comics, animation, & gaming, with little social side.

30-Dec. 2—**ConTraception, Box 1056, Lee's Summit MO 64063. (816) 524-4852.** Kansas City MO.

30-Dec. 2—**TropiCon.** Same contact and hotel as SMOFCon (below). Clement, Pelz, Lundgren, Ruse.

DECEMBER 1990

6-9—**NordCon, % Gdanski Klub Fantastyki, Box 76, 80-325 Gdansk 37, Poland. 236-740.** $72 package.

7-9—**SMOFCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307. (407) 392-6462.** Hilton. Con runners talk shop.

7-9—**Circulation, Box 47, Civic Square ACT 2608, Australia.** Burgmann College, Nat'l. University.

14-16—**Conine, % Adrian Cox, St. Johns College, Oxford OX1 3JP, UK. E-mail: u87apc@uk.ac.ox.ecs.**

JANUARY 1991

25-28—**SwanCon, Box 318, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.** 382-1833, 447-7545. Freeway Hotel, Perth.

AUGUST 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $95 to 12/31/90.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** WorldCon. $75 to 3/31/91.

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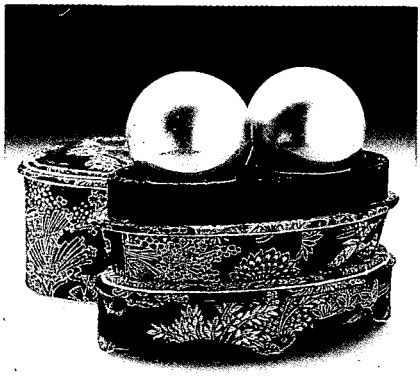

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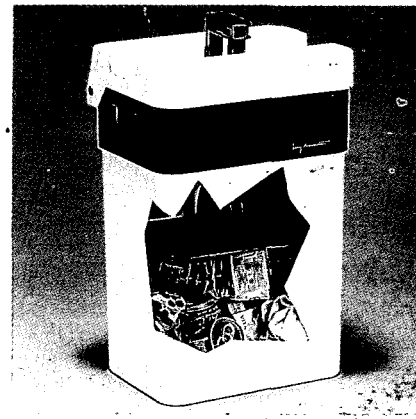

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